



HIGHLANDER'S EVIL TWIN

ADAMINA YOUNG

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Chapter 1

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A Welcome Gift

I want to thank you very much
for purchasing my book.

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Perilous Love.

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Enjoy!

Laird William frowned, deep lines furrowing his forehead. He was tired. Fatigue washed over him in waves. Even though he had steeled himself for this moment, knowing there would be anger and tears, he recognized his daughter's frustration. In truth, he felt it too but there was no way out of this. Worse, it was his fault. Guilt weighed heavily but he also wished fervently that he had not raised her to speak her mind. Heather was feisty, no other word for it. Looking at her in this moment, he saw the anger blaze in her eyes.

"No father, I refuse. I am not going to marry him. I don't even know him." Her eyes filled with tears. "You can't make me do this." She swallowed hard. It felt as if the words would choke her. Dismay wrapped itself around her. Her mood hung like the dull grey clouds overhead. This couldn't be happening.

"You will marry him. You must." He emphasized the latter, then softened his tone. "You know how volatile the people are around here. Each clan must strengthen itself or weaken and die." He reached out to her, his large hands holding her slim shoulders firmly, forcing her to listen and to look up at him. He swallowed hard, feeling her misery. "I have no choice in this. But, I have chosen well for you. His family are revered. They are powerful and strong, as are we...for now. But together, we are all protected. We become powerful. You, my wee lass, will be safe and looked after. Life will be good for you."

"It won't be a good life if I have to marry a man I don't even love!" Heather almost spat the words at him and wrenched free from his grip. She felt sick at the thought of leaving her home and walked to the window, gazing out across her beloved land. "I can't leave here. I will die. It's my home. "

"Oh, my daughter, surely you knew that you would have to leave us

one day. This is the natural order of things. You were always going to find a husband. But Hiram is a good man. He's strong, he's commanding, he's everything that would make a good husband."

"You marry him then!" she muttered under her breath and lifted doleful eyes towards her father. "I haven't even met him."

"You will soon. We are leaving in two days to go to Castle MacGregor where your engagement will be announced." His words were final.

The pain in her heart was physical and intense. It felt as if her heart was breaking. She couldn't breathe, tears streamed down her face completely blurring her vision, and her thoughts were erratic. She shook her head in confusion. This wasn't real. She had to think, to find a solution, but most importantly, she had to get away from her father and to be alone. Head down, Heather stomped heavily to her room, retracting the steps she had taken so many times when she'd first explored this castle as a young girl. She'd thought she would live there forever but now, in only days, she would be leaving. Would she ever see this place again? How could she bear it?

Anger gnawed at her insides. How dare he make such a decision for her? This wasn't the dark ages. Her fists were tight balls of fury at her side and she directed a swift punch at her pillow. She wasn't interested in men. She would never be ready for love or this sham of a marriage. She swallowed back her hatred for this supposed love match and directed the intensity of her feelings at her father. She hated him—no, she despised him. No loving father would sell off their daughter in this way. She was a commodity, nothing more.

From her window, Heather surveyed their undulating lands, fields, and pastures where freedom beckoned. She could run away. Perhaps hide on the land? Then they would be so worried by her absence that they would beg her to stay. But deep down, she knew that it was not a solution. Her father would never allow such bad behavior. He would be worried and would set up a search party, but once found, she would be dragged kicking and screaming and plonked at the feet of her so-called betrothed. There was no escape from her fate.

"Hiram MacGregor. I will not make it easy for you," she vowed. "I may have to marry you, but I will be as bloody-minded as I can be."

An idea came to mind. What if she could be so disagreeable that he would refuse to marry her? She would face the disappointment of her parents and rejoice secretly once back home...single, but triumphant. That would serve them all right. She would have to be careful but, if she chose her moments to be unpleasant, she could plead innocent.

The next few days passed by in a blur of tears, tantrums, and sulks. Dinner, usually unhurried family meetings, had lost all appeal. They were no longer pleasant. Heather, her face tear-blotched, was sullen, irritable, and as rude as she could be so as to express her disdain for their treatment of her. But, with rising frustration, it seemed that nothing she did would change their icy acceptance of the situation. Heart sinking, she realized her father had changed so much. All her life he had told her that she could shape her own way, carve out her own destiny, but his words had been empty. This had been their intent all along. Now, that brave new future and her destiny was stolen and crumbling before her. No amount of pleading would change it.

“Cheer up, Heather,” her mother consoled her. “This union may be everything you ever wanted in life.”

“Aye,” Heather mumbled without conviction. Pigs might fly an’ all. She had always cherished her father and adored her mother, seeing their loving union as one she desperately wanted. But now, she was nothing but a cheap bargaining chip. Her heart crumbled some more, and she lowered her eyes, trying to blink back tears. She’d let them see evidence of her suffering at first, but they were resolved to it. Now, she didn’t want them to see just how terrified and hurt she really was. Ice gripped her heart and the divide between them grew.

Now she was back in her room and packing, stuffing gowns into her large case without care of creases. As she crammed more and more into it, mindful that the delicate fabrics were spilling out beyond the confines of her luggage, Heather turned to see a young servant girl standing in the doorway.

“Are you ready to get dressed Ma’am?”

Heather eyed the lavender dress laid carefully over the girl’s arms. “I have other clothes that I am planning to wear.” Heather nodded towards the dress with disdain.

"I know Ma'am, but I was told that you need to wear this new gown. It has been purchased specially for this...big event," the servant explained, lowering her eyes discreetly after noting Heather's tear-stained cheeks.

"Fine..." Heather sighed, defiance leaving her. What did it matter? She may as well wear it and save the discord. She tried to smile at the young servant, but the smile wouldn't come. Her eyes told of the hollowness within.

She allowed the young girl to assist her, but she clung to her misery like a shroud. She felt utterly exhausted and fragile. Her world and her ability to enjoy it had become disconnected. Heather lifted her arms over her head so that the dress and the complicated layers of fabric could be eased over her shoulders. She fought rising panic as the material engulfed her and she struggled to breathe, but the moment the dress was fitted, she knew exactly why her mother had purchased it. The delicate silk with this subtle shade of lavender enhanced the green of her eyes. It was as if it had been designed just for her. In an instant, she had changed from tomboy Heather into a worldly, womanly, and...perhaps, sensual being. For a moment, she felt grown-up and tasted anticipation. She courted happiness turning first one way and then the next as the material flowed around her legs. But happiness was short-lived as she remembered why she had been given this gift. It was merely there to ensure Hiram was dazzled by her. The MacGregors were buying her but even though she wanted to hate the dress, she couldn't. Everything about it was a work of art. Delicate yellow daisies had been hand-sewn around the neckline—a final connection with her innocence, soon to be lost. The dress said sensual and vulnerable all at the same time, as well as *here is your virgin*. She was to be served up on a silver platter for Hiram to feast upon.

Sighing again, Heather smiled ruefully in the mirror. It was beautiful but she didn't want to wear it.

"It is truly a lovely gown, Milady. It looks perfect on you, I must say." The young girl beamed, her smile widening as she gazed in rapture at her.

“Thank you for your help,” Heather said. “You may go now.” She smiled regretfully at the servant girl and waited for her to leave before turning back to her reflection. It was truly beautiful, designed with innate knowledge of the fabrics and of her shape. If she had really been in love and relishing her engagement, she would have been so happy right now. With eyes closed, she let her fingers explore the soft, silky material. It flowed against her body, enhancing her figure. It teased the eyes and Heather knew any man would be appreciative of her right at this moment. If she could only forget what was waiting for her when they arrived at Castle MacGregor, but she couldn’t. The dress merely displayed her as a sacrificial lamb and her anger, a tight knot within, squeezed hard. She felt she would never be happy again.



“Hiram my dear boy, you are to be betrothed to Heather Douglas of Clan Douglas. Yes, yes, I know—you may have chosen someone else, some unsuitable little...” He stopped in mid-sentence, stroking his curly, ginger beard thoughtfully before continuing. “Believe me, this is a good strategic move for both of our clans. In fact, it will make us virtually undefeatable,” Laird Malcolm MacGregor announced triumphantly.

Hiram took a deep breath. What could he say? He could see his father was pleased with himself but it wasn’t what he wanted at all. He understood the strategic needs of both clans, however, and that they had a duty to pay. He’d been raised to make sacrifices for the sake of the estate but couldn’t help but wonder what she was like. Beautiful? Sensual? Would she be entertaining and pleasant company? Would she stimulate his mind and his body? Would he be that lucky? Please don’t let her be some simpering fool. He almost groaned inwardly at the latter.

“Are you sure this is the best deal that we can make?” he asked his father. “What about other options?”

“Nah my boy, I’ve considered all options. We need this marriage to strengthen our own clan. They are, after all, the second strongest clan in the region. Their men are trained almost as well as our own and I

am sure they are strong and brave warriors in battle.” He contemplated again. “Yes, I think this is the best move to give us the advantage to bring the other clans to their knees. We will conquer them all.”

He looked smug and Hiram’s heart sank. His father had obviously thought this through and he knew, once his mind was made up, there was little chance of changing it. Hiram knew much about strategy, but his father was so much smarter on these things. If it pleased his father, he would acquiesce.

“Alright Father, I understand. When will I get to meet her?” he asked.

“In two days. In fact, the whole family is coming over,” his father stated.

Hiram swallowed hard. So soon? He loved being the single son of the Laird, one who could pick and choose from the local women. If he married...that would have to end. Or would it? Perhaps not, if she hated the idea as much as he did. They could marry. She would bear him a son and then they could lead separate lives. Is it possible they could even strike up an agreement? Respectability and title for turning a blind eye to his dalliances? He liked the idea of that.

It was too much to take in right now. Too sudden. He wished his father had included him in the decision-making process. Maybe there were other options. Sighing, he headed out to the training field to practice his swordsmanship and basic defense skills. It was the only way he could chase the cobwebs from his mind. His father had hired the best teachers of the fighting arts—it had made them all strong. Hiram knew that he was good already, however, it was easier to focus on this than to think of the woman he would be marrying. Training enabled him to stay in good shape, but he wished his father exercised more. In recent months, he had noticed that his father was becoming a little fatter and it would ultimately hurt him on the battlefield.

Sword-fighting demanded a high level of fitness and a layer of fat would only make him vulnerable. So perhaps his father was right to want a joining-of-the-clans, which would provide them with a ready-made army. It might save his father’s life and he relished the idea of his father remaining alive and well and standing by his side for years

to come. A strong military force might mean less time on the battlefields. If his father was right, the marriage would join the two clans and make them close to invincible. One hint of an uprising and it would be squashed quickly. No other clan would dare to challenge them.

Strangely, he felt a sense of loss prickling at him. He loved the thrill of battle. He'd experienced the pleasure of thrusting his sword into the soft flesh of the enemy many times, so how could he really enjoy any kind of peace with other clans? His father saw violence as being a necessity at times. It was strategic and not fueled by anger. In fact, one battle had seen the demise of his youngest brother Patrick. Ever since, his father had not fully regained his sense of self. Patrick hadn't really wanted to fight but had only attended to please their father.

Afterwards, Hiram had suffered painful nightmares. He blamed himself. He should have protected him. He'd only been two steps away and yet, that was a distance too great. Within seconds, Hiram had closed the gap between them and had buried his sword deep into the other man's heart, feeling his frenzied bloodlust overtaking his mind, but nothing could be done to save his brother. It was too late. Patrick lay upon a blanket of blood and Hiram watched with tears in his eyes as the life force oozed from him.

Having witnessed everything, he'd had to contain his grief to help his father somehow accept Patrick's death. It had taken a long time for that to happen and for a time, Hiram had found himself hating war too, when he'd always been so enthusiastic about battle. Eventually, heart heavy, he'd buried the loss of his brother deep within, but the ice in his veins gnawed away at him. After a few months of grieving, bloodlust overpowered his icy regrets and pumped through his veins once more and he'd almost welcomed the feeling. He was still alive, recovering, but now fueled by revenge. Yet, even as he had rebuilt his fighting prowess, now at the top of his physical fitness and expertise, his father was hoping that this proposed marriage would put an end to all the fighting. Hiram sighed. How he hoped that this marriage didn't go ahead.

The castle, lit up with lights and music, seemed to be alive. It had an ethereal feel to it as the lights sparkled and glowed, putting the starlight expanse to shame. The sounds penetrated deep into the inky blackness and the vastness of the sky hugged the building as if bringing it to the fore. Heather felt fear rise within her as she gazed at the magnificent stone castle which boldly dominated the scene in front of her. It rose up from the Scottish heathlands, intentional, strong, and defiant, and seemed to mock her vulnerability and test her strength. Heather felt herself instinctively standing taller.

Inhaling deeply, Heather walked purposefully into the castle, her long and flowing lavender dress trailing across the grass that edged the pathway to the door. Arm in arm, her parents smiled triumphantly as they walked behind her. Although they were happy at this moment, she could also sense their nervousness. This was an important union and they wanted it to go well. She merely felt disdain. The journey had already been a disastrous one with the carriage being delayed and for one brief surge of hope, Heather had thought the trip would be delayed...permanently. Her heart already back at home, she realized with some fury that her father had made sure that there was a spare carriage at their disposal should the worst scenario happen. Sighing her frustration, they clamored into the waiting carriage and were on their way. She'd caught her father smiling smugly as they began the journey and she looked away in disgust, feeling as if she were attending her own funeral. Well, her life was almost over, she thought darkly. They were barely late, but Heather knew all would be there waiting and watching. She swallowed hard. She'd never been one for public attention.

The silk dress flowed effortlessly around her frame and her long red hair was partially coiled at the back of her head, with long tendrils hanging seductively by her face and down her back. The concept was simple—tempt him and seduce him into the idea that this marriage would work. Although the top of the dress was high, it was tight enough to mold to her ample breasts and to make the most of them. Her waist was small, almost tiny in this dress, which then flowed out in abundant silk making her willowy rather than athletic-looking, which was how she usually looked. Heather knew she looked good, but would Hiram think so? There was a part of her that hoped he

would call off the wedding after seeing her, but glancing covertly at her parents, she knew how disappointed they would be. A feeling of revulsion swept over her. How could she marry a man without being in love? It was sickening. He would want to touch her and kiss her; he would demand her to be naked and view every part of her pale skin. Her stomach lurched. Bad memories surged forward, almost engulfing her. She couldn't bear him to touch her. Although she didn't want to be rude to him, neither could she be nice.

Long hallways lit with candles made Heather feel as if she was walking towards her own tomb. The castle was centuries old and had the harshness of heavy stone but adorned with the trappings of wealth. They'd made it welcoming but Heather still walked reluctantly towards the celebrations, the sound of her footsteps drowned out by the revelries. Shadows danced upon the stone walls making the banqueting hall looked eerie and foreboding. Music permeated the outer halls and the wide staircase that arced around, creating dark shadows in the upper reaches. It felt as if she was being watched. Some sinister being noting her every move. Casting her eyes along the walls, the family's history was laid bare and artistically captured in oils. Ancient faces gazed glumly at her from the sturdy frames and Heather shivered. Were Hiram's ancestors judging her suitability?

There were so many people in the hall. Men in their best tartans and women, hair regally swept up, with long gowns that swept along the floor. This was a meeting of all those who were worthy. Even the enemies of the Laird had been invited. The idea was that an olive branch be offered but Heather knew it was really to show off this new alliance and she was the icing on the cake. She wanted to run and hide. Glancing around, she noted the young single women who were unhappy by the prospect of Hiram being married off. No doubt he was a catch to the young women, but as far as Heather was concerned, he could do what he liked as long as he left her alone. Her mood dark, she could still not deny the elegance of this room as she moved beyond vibrantly displayed flowers that adorned the entrance to the great hall, and people standing around expectantly. She heard the excited hush as people noticed her.

"Please...Fa..." she began, whirling around, her eyes wide and

pleading.

“Go on, do not let us down Heather.” His eyes narrowed as he crushed the last remnants of hope within her. Her lips trembled and she shivered again. Fear clutched at her heart.

Her father moved forward, escorting his wife. “We’re late. I was hoping to have a little more time,” Roderick stated, looking around.

“It is always better for a lady to make her entrance at the right time, a little late.” Her mother smiled at Heather. “You look so beautiful my dearest girl.”

“I don’t care about being late, ” Heather grumbled.

He leaned into her with a growl, but it looked to others as if he was simply being affectionate to his daughter. “You had best behave. There is too much riding on this.”

“Like the fatted lamb to the slaughter.” Heather gazed up at him, her eyes glimmering with unshed tears and hatred.

“Hush, Roderick. She’s our daughter and of course she will do what is right. This has all been a bit of a shock for her, but I know that this is going to be a wonderful match.” She smiled, tears in her eyes.

They were announced. Heather stood trembling in the doorway, viewing the hall with wide eyes. Nerves jangled within and she became mesmerized by the flickering flames of the large church candles. So many staring faces, it was impossible to differentiate between them. Materials—in purple, black, yellow, and red—hung from the walls and ceiling, making the room seem cozier. But it had all been carefully presented to show their collaboration—displaying both clan’s colors. The clans uniting through this forthcoming marriage naturally created a sense of expectancy. Everyone knew that this was a big deal. All the men in the room proudly wore their own tartans. All but her father, who had his tartan hanging around his shoulders on his sash.

Fresh flowers framed the tables all around and glorious colors and fragrances drifted through the air. She couldn’t see Hiram, had no idea what he looked like. Would he be kind? Was he romantic? Was he

handsome? Nerves fluttered within.

“Good day, Laird Douglas.” Lady MacGregor presented herself and bowed elegantly to her mother.

“Lady MacGregor, what an honor to meet you. May I introduce my husband Roderick and of course, my daughter Heather?”

Heather focused on the woman who was to be her mother-in-law, nervously looking to see whether there was any hostility in her eyes, but she saw none. Instead, she was greeted with warmth as Lady MacGregor hugged her closely.

“Lady Heather, you are even more beautiful than I could have imagined.” Lady MacGregor hugged her tightly. “Good luck my dear, please be patient with my Hiram.”

Heather struggled to find the right words. “Thank you my Lady, I will try. I...you have a lovely gown on tonight.” She felt a shadow at her side, a foreboding presence, intense, expecting.

“The most desirable man in the Kingdom awaits your attention Milady.” A tall man, rugged with red hair and stark emerald eyes studied her.

Heather turned slowly. “Oh really? Perhaps you will tell me where he is so I can pay my respects.” Inside, Heather recoiled. She hadn’t meant to say those cold words, but icy fear had gripped her heart.

Her father nudged her with annoyance, and she blushed. Just then, her future husband approached.

“I am so sorry my Lord, this is my daughter Heather. She does like her little jokes. Heather let me introduce you to Hiram MacGregor, your husband-to-be.” His tone was firm and gave no opportunity for her to say another word.

Hiram bowed graciously. “Milady, it is a pleasure.”

Heather blushed again and curtsied. She couldn’t quite meet his eyes, knowing that he was scrutinizing her.

He had been shocked by her brashness and wasn’t sure what to make of her. While she was beautiful, he had a feeling there was fire in her

soul and that she spoke before thinking, which could make it interesting. But did he really want that in a woman? His mind drifted back to the recent bevy of beauties who had tried to catch his eye. They had been so keen to attract him that it felt as if they had little personality between them. They agreed with everything he said and just gazed at him adoringly. He'd been bored with them in minutes. So, maybe, just maybe, this beautiful woman would be less yielding, and he could enjoy the chase.

"I must say that this gown brings out the color of your eyes...you are quite beautiful." He bowed and pulled her hand up to his mouth, and she felt him lightly kiss her hand. But he didn't try and hold it too long, releasing her with some reluctance.

"Thank you," she murmured nervously. "The castle is quite beautiful too. I love the way that the hall has been decorated." She smiled as her insides churned.

"Would you like something to drink Milady?" Hiram asked and waited for her response.

"Yes please." She nodded. Her mouth was so dry. It felt as if her lips were sticking to her teeth, and she swallowed hard. The right words wouldn't come at all. Her brain didn't seem to want to work. It had to be nerves. She watched as he made his way to a bar that had been placed in the corner. Hiram didn't push to the front, which he might have done, as it was his home, after all. Heather liked that about him at least.

She studied him as he stood behind the other men waiting to be served. His shoulders were broad and strong. He stood at least three inches above the men around him and his presence was commanding. He seemed well-liked, or perhaps, respected. His hair was red, a little lighter than her own, and it was unruly, but shorter than hers. She imagined him hastily trying to tame the ends, shaping them into a way that was tidy rather than cared for. He was rugged and his jaw was strong. Long muscled legs were revealed beneath his kilt and as if feeling her scrutiny, he turned to look at her as if apologizing for the delay. She saw a wry smile as he shrugged. His eyes were sharp. There was an emotional intelligence about him. It felt as if he could take in

everything around him in one glance. Hope surged within. Perhaps he was nice. Maybe she could grow to like or...even love him. Perhaps their union could be similar to her parents, one born out of respect. She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. It was all too soon to think or worry about it. If he liked her then the wedding would be a done deal.

As Hiram approached her with two glasses of champagne in his hands, she felt the warmth of hope ignite within. She swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry it took so long. The line was pretty long," he said, and handed her the glass. The crystal, light in her hands, sparkled in the flickering candlelight.

"It was nice of you to wait," she said to him.

"Of course. I would not think about cutting in, " he stated, looking at her curiously. "Are you okay Milady?"

She nodded. "I have a headache, and I feel a little...faint." She stumbled slightly and he grabbed her arm to steady her.

"Oh dear, come with me to the garden and we will get some fresh air." He took her glass and then escorted her out of the hall and through a doorway into the garden.

Heather breathed deeply, feeling the cool night air fill her lungs. Almost instantly, her head cleared and the dull pounding at her temples receded a little. She sighed in relief and glanced at Hiram, who was watching her with concern.

"Sorry." She smiled weakly. "Maybe nervousness. This was all rather sudden."

"I understand, for me too." He handed her back her glass and she sipped delicately at the bubbling liquid.

There were fewer people here and she had space to think. There was a deep desire within her to run away but that was never going to happen, and she fought the desire down. Music drifted in a more subdued way towards them and it was far more pleasant. Now it was soft and lilting and she felt her body move in time instinctively, relaxing slightly. Several couples had joined them on the terrace and

holding each other close, embraced the slow flow of the Scottish ballad. The terrace was lit up beautifully with an array of candles and even more flowers. It was incredible. Heather breathed deeply, feeling the intoxicating scent from the floral displays and, whimsically, gazed up at the open expanse of sky above her, now dotted with gloriously golden stars. It all seemed magical.

“Please sit down for a while.” He led her to a stone seat and she lowered herself, wrapping her flowing dress around her legs.

“Thank you Hiram. I feel much better for being outside.”

He nodded. “I don’t want you to worry about the wedding. We both know that we are here to ensure the future of our clans, but perhaps we can make it less difficult if we work together?”

She blushed, not knowing if he was asking her to acquiesce and make the conquest easier. “Yes, perhaps that would be sensible.”

“You are truly a beautiful woman. Your eyes...they are mystifying.” He gazed at her. “They are the deepest green and sparkle in this light.” He touched her chin, turning her face gently towards him as her lips parted involuntarily. He was so gentle and there was an integrity in everything he did. She wanted to believe him and to feel desirable, but there was this fear within her. She could never allow herself to fall for the wrong man again, not like last time. It had almost cost her life. She closed her eyes, fighting back her inner demons.

“Are you okay Milady...do I need to get a nurse to attend to you?” Hiram asked, the concern clear in his voice.

Heather opened her eyes quickly, brought out of her reverie. “No, it’s okay. But could I have another drink do you think?” She handed him the empty glass.

“Of course.” He smiled rakishly. “Champagne suits you Milady.”



Hiram ordered their drinks—champagne and water for them both. He wondered if she had ever had champagne before since her eyes were

sparkling and her cheeks flushed. Several times, however, her cheeks had paled, and he had been concerned for her. He felt the stirrings of desire within him. He couldn't quite believe his luck. She was beautiful. There was something deep about her. She wasn't some servant girl hoping to be impregnated by the Laird's son, or even one of the local women who had designs on him. There was a reluctance about her when it came to their union but she had accepted her fate, at least, *almost* accepted it. But Hiram knew there was much he could do to make their union pleasurable. He was tempted to seduce her here. Give her more champagne, flirt with her a little, but he hesitated. She was different. There was an innocence about her. He supposed if they were going to be together as man and wife, he could wait before seducing her.

Adrenaline pumped through his body. He felt as if he was in the midst of a battle. What was happening? Then he realized. It was the purest attraction. Something deep within him was responding to her. It wasn't just her looks, although he was drawn to her. It was something else. He couldn't quite fathom it but wondered if she felt it too. On a physical level, he couldn't wait for her to be in his bed. He wanted to explore the softness of her body and run his fingers over every curve and make her cry out his name. But her innocence made him want to protect her too and this inner conflict irritated him.

It was a strange cocktail of emotions. Lust tinged with innocence. Suddenly, he felt happy and so glad that his father had arranged this marriage. With his brother in England, Hiram knew he was lucky to be the one offered her. He realized it in an instant and thought about those enticing green eyes and how captivating she was. He felt as if he had been in a trance all his life and yet was only now waking. All he could think about was her scent, her beauty, and that body. He yearned to return to her.

Hiram looked at the long line ahead of him and sighed. "Sorry guys, can you let me by? I need to get a drink for the lady." The men parted instantly and he ordered his drink, impatiently waiting, heart thudding beneath his ribs. Once ready, he placed the glasses on a tray and returned the way he had come, trying not to spill the drinks in his eagerness.

“That was fast!” she said appreciatively and took her champagne, sipping it eagerly.

He smiled. “Well, I cheated this time and asked if anyone minded if we had our drinks first. They were happy to oblige as they know it is a...well, a special occasion.”

The color was returning to her face already and as the light danced against her skin, he felt his desire grow. “I was truly worried that you were going to faint before I could make it back to you.”

“No, my Lord, you saved the day. Thank you very much.” She raised the glass in a toast and smiled.

“I am simply glad to be able to help such a lovely lady and I will do so for the rest of our lives too,” Hiram stated simply.

Where did that come from? What is happening to me? he wondered.

“I am sure you will,” she said flatly.

Hiram frowned. He felt ice cold water on his ardor.

“Your staff really did a wonderful job of decorating everything so nicely, it’s beautiful,” Heather said to break the silence.

“Yes, they made such an effort indeed. I think they wondered whether this day would ever come.” He laughed.

“You didn’t want to get married before?” she prompted.

He shook his head. “I was away for much of the time defending our lands against usurpers. But also, no doubt, not mature enough to be a good husband.” He smiled ruefully.

Heather digested that information in silence, giving nothing away. “I too was not ready. Well, am not ready...not really.” She glanced at him guiltily. “It is all happening so fast.” She sipped her champagne, feeling it settle her nerves. “I only found out about you the other day. The news was presented to me and there was no way out. Sorry. I don’t mean that to sound...like a reflection on you.”

“I understand.” He nodded. “The same happened to me. That’s why I think we must try to make this work in a way that suits us both.” He

thought about his previous desire to bed her until she became pregnant and to continue to bed others. He wondered if that would be acceptable.

“I think we should try. We need to make this work somehow.” She smiled at him, her full lips enticing him.

He was desperate to kiss her. To feel how she might taste, to feel her compliance—or her need to fight him. Either reaction would be fine, he realized. He wanted to seduce her and it might be fun if she protested a little. While it excited him, he also knew he was not capable of hurting her. He wanted her to enjoy it, to have fun with it, and to see how much pleasure they could both have. Hiram drew back from her, fighting temptation. “I am going to get us another drink,” he said quickly and moved away before she could react.

Sitting alone, Heather felt confused. For a moment, it had seemed that he was moving closer to kiss her. She knew that she was willing for that to happen. To see, to test out her attraction to him. Now he was gone and she felt an emptiness, a feeling of rejection within. She sighed deeply. There was something new, too. An aching sensation. She’d never experienced it before.

He was back quickly and handed her another glass.

“I must be careful not to have too much.” She smiled at him. “I haven’t had any since, well, since we had a ball for my younger sister’s birthday.”

“Where is she?” he asked, certain he had only seen three people enter the castle.

Heather swallowed hard. “She died a few months back.”

Hiram could hear the tremulous tone in her voice as she struggled to control her emotions.

“I’m very sorry, I understand how difficult it is. My brother died almost a year ago now.” He drew a deep breath and released it, letting go of tension. He placed his hand over her own. She didn’t move away, just relished the warmth of this connection and they sat quietly for a moment or two.

"I'm sorry about your brother. Were the two of you close?" she asked him.

"Sometimes, but perhaps not as close as I would have liked," he said quietly.

Silence hung like a shroud around them and finally, Hiram cleared his throat. "Would you like to dance? That is, if you feel okay?" he asked.

She took a sip of water to help dilute the champagne that was making her feel heady and excited in this moment. "Yes, I think that would be nice." She smiled and he helped her stand up.

He held his arm out and she put her hand on his, marveling at the strong muscles flexing beneath her hand. He seemed so nice. She wanted him to be nice. They had a lifetime ahead of them and needed to somehow make it pleasant. Her heart pounded beneath her ribs as he drew her close, and she could smell his scent and felt the hardness of his body against hers. The feeling felt good. Too good. His head nestled against her and feeling the rhythm of his lean body made her heart yield. But her head screamed out a warning.

Do not trust him and do not fall in love!

She could hear the scream of her fears inside of her own head, louder and louder until the dull thud of her headache returned and engulfed her. But she said nothing, just clung to him and fought back tears of desolation.

Heather watched sullenly as Laird MacGregor shook hands with her father. Her fate was sealed. She felt a shiver run through her body. It was so final. Her body given to him, not even on a silver platter, but a contract. What could be worse? Their union was settled, whether they hated each other or loved each other, they would be tied. Even though she had been drawn to Hiram, deep down, there had still been hope that they would wake up and realize that it had all been a horrible mistake. A dream. No, a nightmare.

She was sure he had played some vital role in her dreams, but he'd been the shadowy figure who had enticed her to love him and then had betrayed her. Her dreams had been foreboding. She'd woken up covered in sweat and felt the chill of her premonition. There were so many things that could go wrong with this union. He would want children and that meant she would have to accept his body within hers. Heather blushed at the thought. She didn't know if she could be intimate with him, or if she even wanted to be intimate. He might not want her in that way. What if she couldn't give him children? She wished fervently that she could ask for a long engagement so they could get to know each other slowly. That would be okay, wouldn't it?

She opened her mouth to speak.

Laird MacGregor paced in front of the roaring log fire. "So, it is decided. The wedding will take place in two weeks."

Heather's parents nodded and smiled at her. Heather felt sick inside. Two weeks! It was no time at all.

Laird MacGregor was jubilant. "I knew this would be a good match. I would rush the wedding through sooner only I hear that there is a problem brewing on one of the outer regions and this needs to be

stamped out quickly. If you, Lady Douglas and Lady Heather, would like to make my castle your home for now, you are more than welcome. Unless you wish to travel all the way home?"

Her mother turned to her. "Your father is riding to the borders also, as a show of respect, so, if we went home, we would be traveling alone. Your father has requested that we wait here instead, and I agree. We can both help with the planning of your wedding this way!" Her mother smiled.

Heather swallowed the hope that had risen within at the prospect of going home. "Sounds perfect." Her voice was curt, but she said no more, knowing that her parents would be angry if she made a fuss in front of the Laird.

Her father smiled at her, but she could see the ice in his eyes before he turned back to Laird MacGregor.

"Splendid. I look forward to riding with you. I am glad that has been settled."

Her mother slipped her arm through Heather's. It was a sign of warning. For all that Heather was feisty, her mother was equally as strong-minded, and she had learned not to cross her. Heather recalled the one time her mother had slapped her father. It had been such a shock and neither of them had made the mistake to upset her again.

Heather rested her head on her mother's shoulder hoping for some support.

"Sweetie we told you before you don't have a say in this. I am very sorry. I know you had this dream of finding a man and being in love, some sort of happy family but, it doesn't always work out like that. You have a duty to do. It is that simple. It was lucky that your father and I fell in love. But we had several rough years at the start. I hated him, and I would have left him if it was allowed. But we couldn't divorce and were stuck with one another. So one day we talked. We decided that we were not happy, and we hated life. Instead of fighting, we chose to try and work together to meet our goals. He wanted to build the clan up to be stronger, and for our tenants to be happy. Your father is a very good man. However, at first he was a lot

like Hiram is now,” her mother explained.

“Hmm, so you settled for—” Heather began.

“That is enough,” her mother told her firmly.

“So, how long must I suffer before I fall in love with Hiram?” Heather asked out of curiosity. “Did it really take years for you both to love each other?”

Her mother contemplated. “It really did take time. There was respect, of course. That’s important. And there was something about him, but he had a few rough edges that needed to be smoothed off.” She laughed. “After that, it was plain sailing.”

Heather gazed from the window. With the clouds low overhead and seemingly skimming the tops of the trees, they formed an effective border which felt, to Heather, yet another boundary that kept her trapped here. It was impossible for her to explore and she felt as if her mother watched her every move. Even so, the terrace was stunning with sculptures and floral displays that seemed to be inviting and yet, Heather did not feel as if she belonged. She was a stranger in this place but somehow she had to settle and make it her home.

The cloudy grey skies above seemed to intensify the vibrancy of the grasses near the house and beyond. The border of dark trees appeared like brush strokes, leading to rolling hills and mountain peaks. Alongside the terrace, neatly landscaped gardens displayed the talents of their experienced gardener whereas beyond, the ruggedness of nature dictated the scene. It seemed incredible that one day this would all be hers. At least, it would if she could tolerate living with the man who had been promised to her. Could she like him...or even love him? She knew only time would tell, but inside her, a deep knot refused to budge and no matter how much she tried to relax and to talk herself into this union, she could not.

“What are you thinking about?” her mother asked.

“How I am trapped here,” Heather admitted with honesty.

“You know, I saw a young man who could not take his eyes away from you when you met. Once you went outside, I couldn’t see how he

behaved,” her mother commented.

“He was very kind,” she admitted. “He seems to accept our fate.”

“Can you not accept it too? I thought I saw a connection between the two of you last night. Am I wrong?”

Heather shrugged. “We danced and we talked, and he was pleasant. What more can I say? It feels like the time now is a respite from the moment my life is truly taken over. Could you have found worse suitors? Aye, of course, but I can’t help but feel I have lost out now on real love.”

“You don’t have a say in this. I think you should just realize this and do your best to be a good wife to this man. You can look past his flaws, as all married couples must do,” her mother said with finality.

“Yes mother.” She sighed and felt the distance between them grow once more.

Heather made her excuses and left her mother, making her way to the allocated bedroom. A young servant showed her where it was. “This is where you can stay Ma’am.” She curtsied.

“Thank you, what is your name?” Heather asked the girl.

“I am Helene.”

“How old are you?” Heather asked.

“I am ten-years-old Ma’am.” Helene straightened up as she said this, proud of her age.

“What do you like to do Helene? Do you know how to read?” she asked the girl.

“Nah Ma’am I cannot. I am too busy to do much.”

“Would you like me to read a little bit to you, and maybe teach you? I will be here for a while, and well, I do love teaching,” Heather said. She hoped she could do this. It would give her a sense of purpose and would help keep her mind off Hiram and their upcoming wedding.

“I don’t know if the Laird would like that or not. I am to work, not learn while I am here,” Helene said.

"I will make sure it is okay first. Don't worry, I don't want you to get into trouble," Heather said.

"I think I would enjoy it Ma'am," Helene said and grinned, her smile infectious.

"Please Helene stop bowing to me, really. I'm just a normal girl, much like you."

Helene shook her head. "Nah Ma'am, you are a daughter of a laird. I am just the daughter of a seamstress."

"We are all equal in many ways," Heather commented.

It had been something her great-grandmother had taught her years ago and her parents had agreed. In their village, people were all treated the same, whether they had money and status or not. It was one of the reasons her parents were so loved by all. Heather couldn't help but be happy thinking that her parents would always be safe as a result of this alliance. There had been niggling concerns with some of the clans nearby and her father was getting older. She knew people thought he was becoming weak in his old age. But, once she had married Hiram, they would move back to Castle Douglas and rename it as part of the MacGregor clan. It would surely keep the other clans from attacking. She had no choice but to uphold her end of this matrimonial bargain. She had no brother to fulfill his duties, and so it would be Hiram and herself who would inherit. Hiram still had another brother who might be able to take over this area of land when he was older. If not, she had no idea what would become of their combined kingdoms. She still carried the weight of sadness at the prospect of marrying, but she would make the best of it. A light knock at the door brought her out of her reverie.

"Come in."

"Mamma, this is the lady I was telling you about. She wants to teach me how to read. Can I do it please?" Helene jumped up and down in excitement.

Heather smiled at such enthusiasm. "I'm Heather Douglas, I am to marry Hiram MacGregor in a few weeks, and we are staying here for a while, so perhaps you would afford me the honor of teaching your

daughter some words?" Heather queried.

The woman clamped her thin lips together. She seemed surly. "I do not know if it is a good idea. She won't be able to move up from our position, even if she learns to read. It is better not to waste your time on this lass," she said.

Heather noticed the deep sadness that came across the young girl's face. She felt that sadness inside too, and knew it all too well. "Well, I think you never know where she might be able to find work. If she knows more, she will have a better chance in life. I would be so happy to help her," Heather said.

"Aye, if you want to waste your time, you can." Her mother shrugged her shoulders. It was obvious that she didn't care about her young daughter. Heather felt her heart go out to the girl.

"If that's all?" Her voice was tight and disapproving.

"Yes, it is. Thank you." Heather's voice was clipped in return and she dismissed her without looking. If she had looked, she would have seen the anger in the woman's eyes.

Heather was lost in thought. She realized that Helene reminded her of her cousin Bonnie, who had been raised by a woman much like Helene's mother. Bonnie's father had died suddenly and left five children. They all had to be fed, and she simply didn't make enough to feed that many. The children had run wild for some time until Heather's parents had heard about it. They had traveled to find the bairns and then had visited her aunt. It had been quite the scene. She had rarely seen anything like that in her life, and she shivered at the memories. She couldn't think of it right now. She needed to think happy thoughts and to make others feel good. She would start with Helene.

Helene clapped her hands together in delight and Heather smiled warmly at her. "We can start tonight, after you are finished working. Come to me here and I'll read to you."

There were so many resemblances to Bonnie, but she lacked that infectious happiness. Bonnie had been both angry and intensely sad. She had felt betrayed and unloved by her mother and it had been so

sad to hear her crying at night for a home that she never really lived in. She had been just eight-years-old when her father had passed, and by the tender age of nine, her life was on the streets. Once the children had left the house, mainly through neglect, her mother had moved away, not telling anyone where she had gone. Somehow, Heather's parents had tracked her down.

She grimaced as the scene set itself in her mind once more and a sense of coldness penetrated her defenses. She tried to push the dark thoughts away but failed. They were carved into her memory...a permanent scar for the cruelty of the world. Bonnie's nightmares had woken them so many times and she couldn't bear to think what had happened to that young girl during her time on the streets.



Hiram drew his sword back and pushed his hilt with great force deep into the man's chest. "This is what you get for messing with Clan MacGregor." He snarled at the man and spat on his body as he fell.

Energy pumped through his veins. Hiram was alive, conquering all. He was a victor. He ruled these death-soaked lands. Nothing ever fueled him with energy in the same way. It was exciting, it was compelling. It was like being with Heather and feeling that first flush of desire. Looking around, Hiram saw that no one was near him. He was safe, so he allowed his mind to wander. He couldn't help but marvel at his reaction to her. She had been polite and not averse to him, but her coolness had prevented him from kissing those beautiful lips and touching her skin. It wasn't love, but lust was making its presence felt.

Was that enough for a marriage? It didn't matter. It was done. They were both nothing but a deal, a trade-off against peace. But for now, thoughts of Heather did not belong on the battlefield. He glanced to the right; one of the clansmen from the Lowlands was approaching, his sword held high. Hiram dodged the protruding blade and swung his sword automatically. The man stumbled backwards, the front of his body unprotected, and Hiram stepped forward, slicing the blade through his ribs and down to the loins. The man lay gurgling and Hiram smiled in satisfaction.

“Hiram, behind you.” He heard his father’s voice and as he whirled around, his father somehow lunged forward to jump in front of the forthcoming blade, desperate to save his son. The blade cut deep into his father’s neck and he stumbled, his breath catching in his throat, blood pouring from the wound.

“Father!” Hiram shouted, watching as he bent forward, blade falling, hands trying to stop the blood gushing from his neck. He landed heavily onto the ground, blood choking him.

Fueled by anger, Hiram felt all his energy unite in that single moment and swung his weapon, knocking his enemy’s sword to one side. Hiram felt the moment slow down; it intensified. The man greeted death, his eyes wide, a look of fear spreading over his features. Hiram could hear the man’s heart pumping blood. He struck the man again and again. He lost count of how many times his fist connected to the man’s face. Finally, his sword drew back and he thrust his arm forward, driving it straight into the man’s pulsating heart. Hiram felt the moment through every sinew, through the muscles vibrating, and the sensation of sword on bone as it splintered ribs. He only stopped when the last lifeless gasp was emitted and the man froze, his eyes wide open.

Hiram, dazed and alone, with tears streaming down his face, looked at his father and knew he was too late. His blood soaked into the ground, a red blanket on which to rest. He sank to his knees and held his father for hours, talking to him, begging him to open his eyes. There was no one left to battle, and his father was just one last victim.

“I am so sorry Father,” he whispered. “I should have been paying attention. Can you forgive me?”

The slight breeze teased his imagination and he wondered if his father could hear his words. But no answering reply came. Hiram had never felt so alone.

How could he bring himself to tell his mother and sister? How could he ever forgive himself? His lapse in concentration had done this and now, the weight of responsibility was truly his. As his father lay cold under a grey, unforgiving sky where the first drops of rain splattered across this deathly scene, Hiram cried...a deep, guttural anguish that

echoed all around.

In the garden, enjoying the subtle warmth of a subdued sun, Heather listened with intent as Helene stumbled over the words in the book. Her face was pure concentration and she'd been shocked by how quickly the young girl had absorbed so many new words. Heather smiled to herself and felt contented as she listened to Helene's soft tones, knowing that this could change her future. At first, Heather had read slowly for her, forming each word, explaining what each one meant, and then reading the sentences over and over. She'd seen the light and joy shining from her eyes when she'd grasped the meaning of those words and all that they depicted. Now, Helene was repeating those words, forming them, altering her pronunciation of some and, gradually, becoming involved in the story.

Feeling a little lost and lonely, she had allowed her to stay in her room overnight and they had talked and read. Heather had felt waves of sadness wash over her as she realized the depths of treatment handed out to her from her mother.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?" Heather had asked her.

"I have one little sister, and she's the one my mother loves," Helene had commented, in a matter-of-fact way that startled Heather.

"Och no, I'm sure she loves you too," Heather had insisted.

Helene had merely shaken her head. "No, Miss, she has told me this many a time. It is okay."

Heather had hugged her close, her heart aching for her and her mind cast back to Bonnie and what she had been like when she'd first come to stay with them. She desperately hoped that Helene's story would have a different outcome. Heather had smoothed the young girl's hair,

feeling it sticky and dirty beneath her fingers. Appalled, she called for the servant to bring what she needed to wash the young girl's hair.

There was no mistaking the shock on the servant's face or the look of disgust. "She's just a servant."

"Aye, and she's a little girl who needs to find the value of being clean. There is nothing wrong with me washing her hair for her," Heather had stated firmly.

"I doubt her mother would appreciate it much," the servant told her coldly.

"I do not care all that much," Heather retorted, and then had clamped her jaw together, feeling a surge of annoyance rising through her. She held it for a moment, then breathed the feeling away. This was not the way she wanted to talk to those who worked here. "So, you know her do you?"

"Aye, I live beside her."

"So, you know she does not look after this little girl? You have probably heard how she ill-treats her?"

Heather realized immediately that this indeed was the case. The servant nodded, her cheeks coloring, and she bobbed a reluctant courtesy and then walked away quickly.

"Ma'am. I hear someone yelling out at the gate." Helene grabbed Heather's arm and brought her back into the present.

She jumped to her feet as the gate creaked eerily on aging hinges. A lone Hiram rode in on his horse. He was battle fatigued. Heather knew instinctively that something was wrong. She ran towards him, her heart in her mouth and the moment her eyes met Hiram's, sadness pooled in his eyes. She could sense his heart breaking and felt her own emotions rise from within.

"Helene, we will read more later, okay?" Heather turned to the girl, who had run towards Hiram with her. She stroked her soft, glossy hair, and Helene, wise beyond her years, nodded, clasped the book to her chest, and ran back to the servants' quarters.

“What is it? I know something is wrong.” She searched his features. He looked tired, no, broken.

“It is my father. He has died in battle.” His voice broke and he struggled to hold back the tide of emotion rising within him. “I must tell my mother and sister.” The duty weighed heavily on young shoulders.

“I’m so sorry Hiram. I really am. I didn’t know him well, but he seemed like a decent man. I have heard many people say how much they respected him,” she said.

Hiram nodded, his eyes filling with tears. He ran a hand over his face, feeling the roughness of skin that came from being out too long in all weather. His beard had grown longer too. “I don’t know how my mother will take this. I’m really worried about her. It was not long since Patrick died. She took it so hard.” He swallowed but the lump in his throat would not go away.

“Would you like me to help you with this? I have lost people too and I know how it feels. I am so very sorry, Hiram. I know you loved him.”

“Aye, he taught me everything I know.” His voice choked off in a wave of emotion. He seemed grateful for her hand on his arm. He scratched at his beard once more. “Do you think I should clean up first?”

“I would go and talk to them first, let’s get it over.” Heather held his hand in a show of support, her heart heavy as they began to walk side by side.

“Thank you for coming with me. I can’t even explain to you how hard this is for me,” Hiram admitted.

“I can see it in your eyes. They tell me everything I need to know about your feelings.”

“Aye, the eyes are the window to our souls.” He smiled at her slightly, but the sadness never left his eyes.

At that moment, there was a connection between them. A truce. No, she corrected, it was deeper. A feeling of camaraderie and understanding. She could relate to his pain and knew it would take

him a long time to come to terms with the death. He would also be expected to step up to be the Laird. Was he up to that? She couldn't help but wonder.

"Where is my father, Hiram? He is okay?"

Hiram nodded. "He is with the other survivors. You need not worry. They will be back soon. I needed to come on ahead to tell the news."

They walked up the winding staircase together, calling for the servants to collect his sister and take her to their mother's quarters. At the top of the stairs, Hiram stopped and drew in a deep breath, releasing it fully, preparing himself for what was to come. Heather could feel his arm trembling beneath his clothes as he clenched and unclenched his fists and tightened his jaw, before knocking on the door and walking in.

"Mother, I have some bad news," he began.

"Hiram what is going on?" She looked confused, glancing over his shoulder for her husband. "Where is your father?" she asked.

"I...I...I am so sorry." He looked at the ground, trying to contain his emotions. "We should wait until everyone gets here...please."

His mother sat down, energy depleted in seconds. Tears began to fall down her cheeks as the realization tore through her. Hiram bent to hold her, but she shrugged him away, turning her back to him as she sobbed into a tissue. Heather felt so helpless, not able to help Hiram when he so obviously felt his mother's rejection and more so, when his sister Maggie came into the room; she was curious, then little by little, realized that something was terribly wrong.

"Hiram?" Maggie questioned him, her skin sallow under the anticipation that the news was bad.

He shook his head. "I am so sorry. There was nothing I could do, nothing...it was all over so quickly."

She was stricken. Faces ashen and a sense of helplessness fell across the room. She pushed past Heather, hugging Hiram first, and then went to her mother's side, trying to console her. But she was beyond comforting.

"I'll get the doctor to call and to give her something to calm her nerves, perhaps, help her sleep for a while." Heather met Hiram's eyes and he nodded gratefully, helplessly.

She hurried away, stopping only as she reached the great hall. The front door was still open slightly and she felt a chill wind blow in, making her shiver. She closed her eyes, willing the trembling to stop. She had to be strong for Hiram, as this was now a house of mourning. What did that mean for their relationship? More importantly, how could she help him through this time? She felt so inadequate, ill-prepared for such a test so early in their connection. Heather turned as footsteps on the staircase alerted her to his presence.

"I am going to go clean up. I will come to you for dinner in a while," he told her before walking towards his quarters. His head was down and his shoulders stooped, totally opposite to the man she had met, who'd stood strong and confident in his stance. He was a broken man.

She knew Hiram was still grieving for his brother, although they hadn't had much chance to discuss what had happened. This death on top of their previous period of mourning was almost too much for a proud family. There was a part of her that wanted to reach out to him and to hug him and to give him some of her inner strength. She knew what loss did to a person, and although there was no love between them, she felt his pain.



Her heart lurched a little each time she saw him, and she enjoyed his company, perhaps more than was expected, but it took time for feelings to truly develop. All she could do was to be there, she supposed, and to not get in the way. Heather spotted one of the young servants and told her to summon the doctor and to take him up immediately the moment he arrived. Sighing, she walked slowly up to her quarters, her heart heavy.

Lying on her bed, her eyes closed and curled up into a fetal position, she felt the first signs of slumber pulling her into its deep embrace. Her dreams were strange, and she realized she was transported to childhood, running across the large expanse of moors near them. She

remembered such joy in her freedom of movement, that carefree spirit, that zest for life. Encapsulated in the moment, she yearned for that inner child. A faint noise within the room had her struggling to find full consciousness. Her dream state kept pulling her down, dragging her back to a time when she was truly happy. But the sounds around her became more insistent and groggily, she broke free of the dream and sat up, confused and disoriented. When she opened the door, Hiram stood leaning against the wall, his eyes slightly red, which told her he had shed some tears. But he looked a little better. He had trimmed his beard and changed, but the weariness shone brightly through his eyes all the same.

"I want to ask how you are, but I know that is a crazy question. Just know that I am here if you want to talk."

He swallowed hard and nodded his gratitude. "You were asleep?" He took in her tousled hair and reached out to smooth it down.

Heather blushed at the softness of his touch. "I suddenly felt so tired and my dreams were so confusing."

"Tell me," he said as she beckoned him to come into her room.

"I was a child again. I'd recaptured that inner me, the young child who roamed freely across the Scottish moors, frolicking in the heather and squealing with joy, watching butterflies dance in the air and listening to the soulful songs of birds."

"You make it sound so wonderful," he said and sighed deeply.

"It was," she admitted. "My parents were so happy together...most of the time. And I loved our land. It wasn't always happy but yes, I miss the innocence of those times."

"Before you were forced into marriage with me." He looked at her with dark eyes, raising one eyebrow questioningly.

She shrugged. "Maybe. It is not the way I would choose to marry. I am a romantic I guess. I have longed for the time when I might fall in love and be loved in return. An arranged marriage doesn't feel the same."

"For me too," he admitted.

Heather's heart lurched for a second. Was he going to release her from their deal? While one part of her relished that opportunity, another part felt disappointed that it might be over before it started.

"Do you regret our contract?" she asked tentatively.

"I regret only that we could not meet and love in the way that it should be." Hiram sighed and leaned back against the solid headboard, shifting his legs so that they stretched out down the length of her bed. He closed his eyes for a moment but opened them again quickly. "I tried to sleep but I can't. Every time I close my eyes, I see the death of my father."

Heather sat on the bed beside him and placed her hand over his. "It will fade...in time. I promise you this."

He nodded wearily. "Your father is home, by the way. He is with your mother."

"I heard him come in," Heather admitted. "Knowing that he is okay is enough. I have left him to talk to mother. I thought they would appreciate time alone."

"I understand. I don't quite know what I want to do. I feel so angry, so hurt, so sad. I don't know which emotion is hurting me more. There is so much on my mind. So much to do, but I am in no way prepared for any of it."

She squeezed his hand and moved closer, and he pulled her firmly towards him. His warmth surrounded her but at the same time, she felt a wave of grief that was gripping him so tightly. Despair, sadness, and anger emanated from him.

Hiram clung to her like a drowning man looking to her for support, for some respite from the pain.

"I'm so sorry Harim. I am so sorry," she kept repeating over and over to him as she hugged him in return. His shoulders shook slightly and the movement, although subtle, told her that he was sobbing silently. Her head nestled against his chest, she felt teardrops against her own skin. She held him tighter, feeling his lean body against her own. *I wish I could take his pain away*, she thought, but knowing only time

could do that. Gradually, his tears stopped, and they lay in a quiet embrace, their bodies entwined.

"I'm very sorry. That was very weak of me." Hiram turned quickly to leave.

"Not at all," she told him. "It is a sign of a real man. Never apologize for showing you have heart and soul," she said to him quietly.

"My brother Connor would never have acted this way. He is the strong one. He would have told me how much of a lass I was by crying about this." Hiram smiled sadly. "He's been in England attending to family business. He's a bit of an asshole."

"When will he be back?" she asked.

"A week or so. He and I will have to work together. It states this in my father's will. The estate needs us. We have to put personal feelings aside," he explained to her.

"Oh, and us?" she asked tentatively.

"We will still marry. I hope that is agreeable to you. With the death of my father, some of the other clans will see us as being weak and may strike. The extra support we get from your father's clan will be needed more than ever now. It seems as if the peace my father dreamed of may not yet be possible," Hiram said.

"They won't let you grieve in peace?" Heather felt anger rising within her.

"No, it would be doubtful. Hitting us while we are weak will probably make more sense to them. The clans will start fighting amongst themselves, trying to become rulers."

"And if we marry? Once our two clans consolidate?" she asked.

"Not if, *when*," he told her firmly. "Aye, sadly it is a possibility," Hiram responded.

Heather knew that if she wanted to back out that this would be the time to do so. She bit her lip thoughtfully. They still had some time and the wedding could be canceled, but she knew her father would be furious. Heather cast a glance at Hiram from under her long eyelashes

and wondered what it would do to him. He had shown her his vulnerable side. Could she really do that to him?



Only a week had passed since death had come to the castle. Heather walked down the aisle, her heart heavy. Hiram had advised her that they could not wait and even though they were all grieving, their marriage provided a glimmer of hope towards peace and unity of the two clans. She had to play her role. She walked down the aisle, her long flowing gown a perfect fit. The white dress made her look innocent, vulnerable, and tempting. It accentuated the broadness of her shoulders and her long, elegant neck, but it was nipped in at the waist so that it flowed provocatively from the hips. She could see by Hiram's expression that he desired her greatly and felt her heart swell under his appreciative gaze. Her wedding dress had been beautifully designed, even though the seamstress had worked day and night to finish it. Heather loved the long train which trailed behind her for almost twenty yards. With her red hair swept up majestically on top of her head, the lacy veil gave everyone only tantalizing glimpses of her face. Heather had never felt beautiful.

As she stood by Hiram's side and he smiled at her, a wide grin that told her of his feelings at this moment, she knew they were partners in crime. Their union would save the clans and potentially save the lives of others. That was significant but in Hiram's mind, they were honoring his father's wishes. She knew that meant a lot to him.

She couldn't help but wonder why his mother had been so keen for them to get married, especially at this time of great sadness, but when she'd asked her that question, she'd informed her that it was one way to bring happiness into the home again. Even though she had said the words, Heather felt her eyes were empty. There was no warmth, no emotion. It was as if she had cried it all out of her system but now was just about functioning. She knew that Hiram was desperately trying to support the family and yet, his mother treated him with contempt. She felt Hiram's fingers reach for hers and the touch of his skin comforted her greatly, the rising warmth catching at her throat as her heart swelled within. She swallowed hard, unable to stop tears pricking at

her eyes.

The church was packed with clans from all over who were coming to watch this union for themselves. Family sat at the front and Heather knew her mother was crying already, her happiness and joy at the union making her overly emotional. She was glad both her parents were happy but deep down, knew that she yearned for that deep love and affection. Could Hiram fall for her? Could she learn to love him? It was a question she asked herself repeatedly. She was attracted to him and knew that he was to her, but was it enough?

As the vicar went through his speech, Heather became lost in the glittering depths of Hiram's eyes. They seemed to be sending her a special message: *Wait for tonight*. She saw his eyes sparkle mischievously and felt a wave of anticipation engulf her. She was nervous and excited about lying with him for the first time and licked her lips in anticipation. Hiram noticed her instinctive response and his eyes sparkled even more.

Hiram missed much of what the vicar said but remembered to say, "I do," at the appropriate time. Heather's voice trembled when she repeated her vows, giving her life to Hiram and promising to be his until death do them part. Heather glanced at her mother and father. They were in tears and their deep emotion both for each other and for her made her own emotions heighten. She reached for Hiram's steadying hand when her legs threatened to give way and felt his energy flowing through her, keeping her upright. She smiled up at him, thanking him silently and hoped that they would grow as a couple and that they would be compatible in all ways. As her thoughts slid to their sleeping together, she felt a slow flush to her cheeks and tried to look away before Hiram could realize her thoughts.

Then it was all over. He kissed her lightly on the lips, a promise of what was to come, and proudly walked with her down the aisle.

“*H*eather, I’d like to introduce you to my brother. Connor, this is my wife, Heather,” Hiram stated proudly when she walked into the dining room and joined them at the table.

“She’s even more lovely than you described. Nice to meet you, Heather,” Connor said.

Heather smiled at him kindly. “It is good to finally meet you too.”

She recalled Hiram’s words that his brother was nothing more than an asshole and wondered if it was sibling rivalry or if indeed, he really was nothing like her husband. As she watched them interact, she suddenly realized that they were so similar, almost identical.

“Oh, you are twins?”

“It didn’t take her all that long to figure out, even with my hair color changed, although I am sure she can see that I am the good-looking brother!” Connor chuckled.

“She’s a smart woman, I told you that already.” Hiram smiled broadly and squeezed her hand. They were so similar and yet, there was something different Heather thought, or maybe she was merely being influenced by Hiram’s feelings.

He had never really spoken much about his brother and she had longed to ask but always felt that there was a barrier when it came to him. Yet he seemed likeable and was talkative and engaging. So, what was it? Perhaps now that Connor was back, Hiram would feel ready to talk to her about his brother so she could understand. They were chatting animatedly now so perhaps past frictions had dissipated now that they were older.

“My brother, it is so wonderful to be back. It has been a long time

since we were together, and I have missed you. I cannot believe that you are now married. I missed the wedding and I am sorry for that. How long have you been married now?" he asked.

Hiram smiled at Heather. "Just a month and a half now. We didn't want to wait with the clan unrest. It was not the most romantic time to get married, with father having just died. But we honored his wishes." His emotions rose up within him and he held Heather's hand, blinking back unwanted tears.

"I thought maybe you had grown up into a man while I was gone but I see you are as sensitive as ever. Heather, did you know you married a female?" He raised an eyebrow at her and waited for her reaction.

Heather gasped. The remark was totally unexpected. Before she could say anything, Hiram cut in.

"Connor, don't start already, Heather doesn't even know you yet," Hiram warned.

"It is okay Hiram; I know the truth about you. I know a real man when I see one and I lie next to one each night." She stood up suddenly, looking at Hiram. "I must write to my mother. She wanted to know when your brother was home so they could come and visit. Excuse me."

Heather walked away, inwardly fuming. How dare he say such things about Hiram? Now she understood all too well why Hiram disliked him.

Heather returned to their chambers; it had become a sanctuary against the stresses of the day. She had a feeling that she would be here much more now that Connor was back, and she hoped that he would become bored at playing joint Laird and leave again. She didn't really understand why he had left in the first place, but she hoped that whatever the reason, the desire to go would strike soon. It was rare that she felt dislike for someone, especially so quickly, but Hiram was her husband and she would always support him.

Perhaps in time things would settle here. She had to focus just on her marriage and consider the needs of her husband...as she had last night. Heather smiled. It had been the most deliciously, tender love-

making session yet. She had been in bed waiting for him and he'd slid between the sheets, pulling her back towards him, sliding his arm around her, his hands roaming all over her body. At first, she had protested at their position, but the passion inside her welled up and quelled her voice. She could feel him hard against her naked body and he had fondled her nipples until she had groaned out loud.

When he had explored her fully this way, he'd turned her to face him and they had kissed, his tongue invading her mouth, kissing her in earnest. Then he had made love to her for hours on end and once she was satisfied, he released his own desire for her. They had slept still caught up in their embrace. She'd dreamt of conceiving his baby and felt her desire well up inside her again. She longed to be pregnant with his child and wanted to bring happiness into their lives.

More, she felt that she would be a good mother and believed in the ethos of the marriage. They would bring their child up in the best way they knew how, working together to create a happy, harmonious home. Of course, they had never discussed this at all, but she could only wait with anticipation for when he would impregnate her. He had never told her he loved her, but he treated her with such respect and consideration. She was sure it was only a matter of time.

She'd been so afraid that he would be arrogant and demanding but she hadn't seen much evidence of this. She knew he had an inner strength and he was capable of emotion but had heard people say he had demonstrated his arrogance at times. Most of the time he treated her as an equal. The only time he didn't include her was when he was talking battle strategy. She dreaded the time when he would ride out to fight again. What would she do if he died? She couldn't bear the thought.

The floorboards outside the room creaked and startled her. Hiram? She hoped it was. She needed to feel his arms around her and for him to make love to her again. She felt the remnants of her desire from last night rising again and rushed to the door.

"Connor?" she gasped. "What is it?"

"I just came to let you know Hiram received some unsettling news about unrest brewing. He told me to let you know he would be back

in time for our next meal.”

She felt a wave of disappointment. “Why did you not go too?”

“He asked me to stay here to look after you.” Something in his voice made her look away.

“Are you okay?” His voice broke into her thoughts and she jumped. He grabbed her arm to help steady her.

“Yes, I am fine,” she said stiffly, trying to remove her arm from his grasp. She stepped back a little but to her dismay, he moved forward, now almost inside the room.

“Do I make you nervous Heather?”

“No. Why would you?” she replied haughtily. A flash of annoyance sparked in her eyes and Connor grinned.

“I make a lot of women nervous.”

She swallowed hard. “Well, I am sorry to disappoint you, but I am not one of them.”

He smiled slowly.

“Shall we put it to the test Milady? I bet I could make you forget all about my pathetic twin?”

“Leave now or I will call the servants to get the guards and they will remove you by force. Your choice.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to have a real man first?” he asked her.

“Get out!” she raised her voice almost to a scream.

“You’ll change your mind,” he said, laughing as he sauntered out of the room, and slammed the door shut behind him.

Heather sat back on the bed. Every fiber of her being trembled. She was shaking all over. Her heart beat erratically beneath her ribs and hot tears spilled down her cheeks. She replayed the scene in her mind. He’d meant every word, she was sure of it. Perhaps he had been testing her to see what her feelings were like for Hiram, or to see if

she had the strength to battle against him. Heather had learned to trust her instincts. When she felt uncomfortable or fearful with people, she believed that her instinct was telling her something important. It was telling her now that Connor was very dangerous. He liked power games but above all else, he liked to win. She wanted to believe it was just sibling rivalry. He was annoyed that his younger brother had beaten him in the marriage stakes. But if he'd really set his sights on her then he wasn't going to stop until he'd achieved his aim. She had to keep away from him.

Heather hid behind her door. Footsteps were growing nearer and slowing down just outside her door. She could hear the creaking floorboards and the sound of breathing outside.

No, please don't stop.

She waited with bated breath. Connor? Had he gone? She tried to quell her nerves. She couldn't let him see that she was nervous of him even though she felt fear when she saw him. They had met several times following that first encounter when he had been all too suggestive. It had not improved at all. He was becoming more and more menacing. Hiram had been away for longer than anticipated and now Heather felt as if she was a prisoner in her room. She leaned against the door, closed her eyes, and listened for any sound. She slowly counted to five hundred just to be sure. When she had finished, she opened the door and peered outside. There was no one there. She let out a huge sigh of relief.

She longed for Hiram to come back. She missed him so much. It felt as if a part of her was missing. It seemed in no time at all, Hiram had become an essential part of her life. He had awoken something in her. She'd never dreamed she was such a sexual being. Now, she couldn't get enough. He only had to look at her and she wanted him. He was fun, charming, and now, she could see, so charismatic. She liked the way he would grin lazily at her or be able to detect when she felt huffy or shocked. He would mock her or pull her to him and kiss her until she was breathless. She knew he baited her, taunting her with his words, but in a fun way.

Heather made her way down the stairs furtively. She tried to tread softly so no one would hear her and light-footed, skipped across the substantial hallway and slipped outside. Embracing the warmth after

an evening of rain and howling gales, the sun peeked out from behind the clouds casting a golden glow across the expanse of green. She could only pray that she would catch sight of Hiram and the others riding back across the moors. Before she could even reach the gateway so as to scan the rolling hills, she saw Hiram, heard his voice, and waves of pleasure washed over her. He looked up as she approached.

“Well, to what do I owe this special pleasure?” He slid from his horse, handing the reins to a stable hand and then walked over to her, pulling her into his arms, his mouth lowering to her, teasing her. “It feels like I have been gone for years.” He growled at her, his hands pulling her closer to him.

“Hiram, I am afraid I must tell you something,” she began.

He looked down at her, his face suddenly serious as he saw how anxious she was. “Yes my love?”

“I am so sorry to tell you this. I cannot hide it from you. It is Connor. He has been following me around the castle ever since you left. He’s been making unsuitable comments to me.” Heather blushed. She hoped he wouldn’t ask for details.

Hiram laughed. “I know he is so full of himself and he likes to think women love him but I’m sure he isn’t pursuing you,” Hiram responded.

Heather tried once more. “You don’t understand. He is saying things to me that are not normal.” She stopped, feeling embarrassed. She didn’t want to tell him specifics. His words made her feel dirty.

Hiram hugged her. “He is trying to be friendly, but he just goes over the top with everything he does. I told you he is an idiot. I think you are just being too sensitive. Let it go, Heather. I need you to try to get on with him,” Hiram said.

“Hiram...please.”

“I said no. I have just come back. I’m dirty, tired, and I don’t want to be bothered right now, not with your silliness.” He dismissed her with a wave of his hand and walked past her.

Tears stung her eyes. She was angry. How could he think that she

would make it up?

Heather turned to look over the rolling hills, trying to breathe in that good Scottish air, imagining it filtering throughout her body, healing, energizing. Hiram was long gone before she let the hot tears sting her cheeks. She didn't attempt to stop them, just let her sadness go. By the time the tears had dried, the natural scene had calmed her a little. She walked back to the castle, asking the servants to bring her supper up when it was ready.

"I am feeling a bit tired. I have a headache," Heather said.

The last thing she wanted was to see either of the brothers for the evening and hoped she could be asleep by the time Hiram came to bed. His words and attitude stung, especially since her fears with Connor were very real. As she climbed the staircase, her energy felt depleted. She seemed to be taking longer and longer with each step, or the staircase was growing steeper. It hurt to not be believed. She had been completely honest with him about everything and yet he didn't believe or trust her.

She heard a voice whispering in her ear.

"Didn't he believe you?" His breath was warm behind her.

She signed in irritation. "Leave me alone. I can assure you that you are the last thing I would talk to my husband about when he has been away all this time. Trust me Connor, you are at the bottom of my list."

"I bet you have been dreaming about me," he teased her.

"Uffff...nightmare more like. You are not so special."

"I like to banter with you...but at some point, I will take you Milady, and show you what you have been missing out on."

"If you persist with this type of talk, be assured, I will tell my husband." She drew herself up so she was taller, and her eyes sparkled with her inner rage.

"He'd hand you to me on a silver platter. Don't ye know I get everything I want? He's my twin. We share everything. Even our women."

Heather gave him her most withering look. “Be away with you Connor, I have better things to do with my time.”

She stomped to her room, energy returned and pulsating through every part of her. She knew she was flushed and that the fire raged in her eyes, and although she had wanted to strike him, she knew that she dared not. He was more likely to see it as foreplay and take her. It was only when she was in the safety of her chambers that she allowed the tears to come. She cried silently for a long time. Her wonderful new life had already come crashing down around her. She couldn’t stay, she couldn’t.



The days rolled by in an endlessly monotonous stream with Heather remaining in her room for as much as was possible. She managed to be out walking whenever Hiram sought her out and would only find this out when told by the servants upon returning. Night after night she had brought food up to her room and she knew the servants must be talking.

“Let them,” she said in defiance.

“Talking to yourself?” Hiram was in their room getting ready for dinner when she walked in.

She blushed and looked away. She could hardly bear to look at him. “Yes, I was.”

Hiram shrugged. “Are you deigning to join us tonight?”

“No, I am tired. I have been out on a long walk and I think an early night would be wise.”

“I think it’s time that you stopped being so childish,” he spat at her. “I thought I had married a woman, not a brat of a girl.”

“I thought I had married a real man. One capable of love and understanding. It seems that you and Connor really are one and the same.”

Hiram paled and his eyes darkened. She could see he was barely

containing his anger.

“For your information, I asked Connor what he had said to you and he said he’d been joking with you and was horribly embarrassed that he’d offended you.”

He turned and walked away. When he’d gone, she shut the door angrily behind him and then slid to the floor, hot tears spilling over her cheeks. She didn’t know if she could take this. Her husband’s rejection or the fear of Connor brutally assaulting her. Perhaps it was all a game. Maybe Connor just enjoyed this game of cat and mouse. He liked having power and resented Hiram for having what should have been his.

Hiram had said he disliked Connor and yet, it seemed to her that he worshipped him. If only he could see the truth, but she knew he didn’t want to believe that his brother was capable of such games. Connor was clever, sneaky, and manipulative, but until Hiram realized this, Heather knew she wasn’t safe here.

Heather ate her food slowly. She had little appetite and picked over the crumbs absentmindedly. Finally, plate discarded to one side, she undressed and got into bed, pulling heavy bed covers up over her body and laying on her side, she picked up her favorite book. But for once, tales of romance and unrequited love were not what she needed. She could feel her eyes growing heavy as sleep began to close in around her. She felt herself sinking deeper into a state of oblivion where finally there was some respite from her situation, and she gratefully succumbed to the peace of mind that invaded her through sleep.



There was no sign of Hiram in the morning. His side of the bed had not been slept in and she was relieved. She dressed quickly and made her way to the garden. She chose a different part of the land with lots of small segregated sections which afforded privacy from the castle windows. The sun was a pale ball of yellow in the sky and clouds danced in the heavens as the breeze scurried them across the open expanse. She felt her head clear, grateful that the mental fog had

lifted.

Despite the fresh breeze which played with her hair, the gentle warmth or the melodic bird song which usually resonated with her, Heather felt empty. She longed to be back in that thistle field near her real home. She had completed her side of the deal so what was there to prevent her from going to visit her parents? They would welcome her back thinking it was an extended holiday. She didn't have to tell them what was happening. Or, maybe she should confide in them. It was something to think about anyway. Breathing in deeply, Heather exhaled her stress and frustration and lay back on the grass. Fragrances from the nearby flower beds filled her lungs and teased her senses. For a while, peacefulness washed over her, like a rising tide of contentment, just being in the here and now, a perfect balm against real life. She needed this time out. A chance to regain balance, to collect her thoughts, and to offset her anger and deepest frustrations. Here, she could let go.

What hurt her the most was not being believed. She would never have lied to him or anyone else, for that matter. She just wanted to feel safe, to feel protected and loved. Her heart lurched. She had wanted Hiram to love her completely like she...*Stop*, she told the voice in her mind. *Don't go there. It's too late.* Her heart had swelled at the mere thought of him. Grimacing, she directed her thoughts back to her childhood—carefree, running through the moors, skipping, laughing, dancing. Life was so simple back then. It had been a wonderful childhood. Those early years of innocence had promised so much.

The faintest touch on her arm made her open her eyes quickly.

“Connor. What are you doing here?” She tried to sit up hurriedly, but he pinned her down with one arm.

He was lying beside her and she hadn't been aware of his presence at all, but his touch made her skin crawl.

“It was fun watching you. I wonder what kind of face you make when you orgasm,” he said.

“You really are quite a vile man aren't you? It is none of your damn business. The only man who needs to know is my husband.”

“Hmm, but I wonder where he was last night?”

She blushed and felt herself cringe inwardly. Where had he slept? For one awful moment, she imagined him in the arms of another, but then pushed that thought to one side. Connor wanted her to think that.

“He knew I wasn’t well and didn’t want to disturb me last night. He was considerate.”

“I could be more considerate.” He trailed a finger along the skin of her arm, still holding her down.

“You think of no one but yourself.” She went to move but he forced the flat of his hand on her chest and pushed his weight through his arm. Heather gasped.

“Get off me!” she spat at him and tried to scream as he pressed his weight onto her, placing one hand over her mouth.

“See how easy it would be to take you?” Connor laughed.

Heather struggled beneath him but could hardly move. He rolled on top of her, one leg over her. All his intent driving through his hips so that she could feel his growing desire. She tried to move and to push him away but could hardly breathe. The moment she felt his weight shift, she pushed him away and he rolled back onto the grass, laughing.

“You are a poor excuse of a man. There is nothing about you that is desirable. I am drawn to Hiram because of his personality and the goodness which radiates from him. But *you*, hah! You are a mere shadow of him. Now keep away from me!”

She ran off through the gardens, fearful that he might chase her, but all she could hear was the sound of his laughter echoing through the grounds. Heather ran across the drive and into the house and continued to run, her breath ragged and lungs bursting until she made it to her room and with trembling fingers, locked the door behind her. She felt violated. Disgusted. The peace that she had managed to find within was shattered, stolen from her. Was this going to be her life going forward? Hiding in her room always, not able to mix with others, fading away until she was no longer an acceptable part of

society? In time, people would call her strange; she'd be the woman locked away for her own safety. Tears fell once more. Hot, angry tears staining her cheeks. She had to do something. She wasn't going to be a victim, but she needed help.

Sitting at the bureau in the next room, Heather began to write to her mother asking for her help. She poured out her heart and explained everything, including Hiram's disbelief in her. She ended the letter with a final plea:

I am truly fearful for my life. I do not know if he would kill me, but he has rape on his mind. Help me please. I need to come home.

Your loving daughter, Heather.



"Hiram, can I talk to you?" Maggie stood at the gate as he came in.

"Sure, what do you need?"

"There is something you need to know. I would like you to hear me out. It is...um...delicate. But, you are my brother and it is about your wife."

Hiram's face darkened. "What has she said to you?"

"She hasn't. I haven't really had the opportunity to even get to know her. We rarely talk. She is always hiding in her room and I hear her locking her door. Hiram, this is not right. Can you not see how pale she is? She is scared."

She laid a hand on her brother's arm, stopping him from walking away. "I can see something is wrong between you and that is not my business, but I am not sure if you know what is happening here?" Maggie said.

"Nothing is happening," he said angrily. "I don't know what has gotten into her, but..."

"It is Connor." Maggie sighed. "When you are not around, he is following her, threatening her."

“What?” Hiram was incredulous. “Connor wouldn’t do that.”

“He would and he is. We have all witnessed it at different times. I am fearful for her. You must protect your wife.”

Hiram felt a red mist rising within him. Pure anger boiled in his veins. Anger at Connor and anger at his belief in his brother. “You must be wrong. He wouldn’t do that. He is an irresponsible and nasty person, but he would not do that to me.”

“He makes terrible suggestions to her but this morning I was seated in one of the little areas of the garden, just taking in the morning air. I didn’t realize that Heather was doing the same, you know how private it is there. I couldn’t see her, and I didn’t hear her until she cried out. I went to look—he was on top of her, Hiram, pinning her down. He had his hand over her mouth.”

Maggie bowed her head. “I was too scared of the consequences to interfere and she managed to get away, but that’s why I have to tell you now. Before he does what he is threatening.”

Hiram felt the ground shift beneath him and staggered. He felt shocked to the core; a rising wave of nausea engulfed him.

Maggie extended a hand to steady him.

“Are you okay? You didn’t know.” She stared into his ashen face.

“She tried to tell me...ach no, what have I done?”

“Come on, let’s walk together back to the castle and you can then go and talk to her.”

He nodded, grateful for Maggie’s presence, knowing that he had made such a mistake at believing Connor over Heather. He felt the weight of guilt and knew Heather had seen it as a betrayal. He didn’t blame her at all. He just didn’t know what to say to her. How could he put this right? As they entered the castle, they walked past a servant who was carrying letters. Hiram noticed Heather’s distinctive scrawl and reached out to take it.

“I need to give this back to Heather, as she forgot to add something,” he told the servant before dismissing him.

“Hiram, you can’t touch her letter.” Maggie was shocked.

“It’s to her mother and look, the ink has run. It is tear-stained.” He cast an anxious glance at his sister. “Maybe this letter will tell me all I need to know.”

They sat down together on a wooden seat to the side of the castle grounds. The views were spectacular here and Maggie focused on the rolling hills, the purple sheen and haze that concentrated across their land and breathed in the heady scent of flowers. She knew one day she would have to leave this place and although she would hate to leave her home, there were times when she longed to break free from the suffocating tension that was enveloping her from within these walls.

Hiram read the letter steadily, his hands shaking. Silently, he handed the letter to Maggie to read and she began to cry as the reality of the situation was completely laid bare.

“Oh my god, Hiram. She is so afraid. So lost. So lonely.”

“I will kill him for this!” he snarled through gritted teeth.

“Wait. You need to make things right with Heather first. Then talk about this. Think clearly Hiram. Don’t do anything rash.”

He swallowed his anger before nodding at her. Tears stung his eyes. His reddened face told of his inner battle to control his next move.

He squeezed her hand and said, “Tell no one of this. I want some time to think, okay?”

She nodded and watched as Hiram strode away towards the castle.



Heather was curled up on the bed when Hiram knocked at the door.

“Heather, can I come in?”

She groaned inwardly. “Not now Hiram, I have a terrible headache. Come back later.”

He sighed. “This won’t wait, it is really urgent.” His voice was quiet,

resigned.

Was he leaving? Another dispute with the clans? He couldn't leave her with Connor. Heather leapt from the bed and opened the door. "You can't go away. You just can't!"

Her fear was tangible. Her eyes red-rimmed, her cheeks stained with tears and mascara. She was terrified. Hiram felt his breath catch in his throat.

"What have I done to you? My wee bride. Come here."

He pulled her into his arms and held her. Heather went willingly, relieved to feel safe even if only temporarily. When he released her, he pulled the letter from his pocket. "I want to talk to you about this."

She gasped. "You had no right to read that!"

"Maybe not," he agreed "but I am glad I damn well did. Is this how you feel? Is it so bad?" He shook the letter at her.

Heather stepped back from his arms and nodded. "I haven't encouraged him. He sickens me to my core." She emphasized this by placing her hands on her stomach.

"I had no idea that—"

"You did!" she bit back angrily. "I told you ages ago. I tried to tell you what he was doing. My only way of staying safe was to hide in here. You didn't care, so who was going to keep me safe?"

"I do care." His eyes darkened as a sense of shame welled up within.

"He told me that you always share your women. That you would practically gift-wrap me." Heather sat suddenly on the bed and bent over, covering her face as she sobbed once more.

Hiram sat by her side and pulled her to him. She didn't look at him but curled up, her head on his legs as he stroked her hair. "I am so sorry. I feel sick at your torment. I feel so angry with myself and with him. I should have known that he couldn't be trusted, but he was so much nicer to me this time around. But now I see it, this was to manipulate me so he could get to you."

“Why did you look at my letter?”

“Maggie told me that she had seen him with you this morning and she’d witnessed other things. She’d been scared to confront him, but she told me everything. I was coming up to see you and I saw the letter. I knew you had been crying as the ink had run. After hearing what Maggie had told me, I had a feeling you would have poured your heart out in a letter and I needed to know.” He sighed. “Please don’t hate me.”

Heather sat up. “I don’t hate you Hiram...I...I...”

Hiram held her face in his hands. “You love me? Please tell me you love me because I love you more than I ever imagined was possible.”

“Oh, I do!” Heather cried and fell into his arms.

He pulled her onto the bed so that she lay beneath him and began to pull at her clothes. “I’m going to show you exactly how much I need and want you, my beautiful wee lassie.”

He began to tear at her clothes, revealing soft white skin and breasts that tantalized him. He knew he needed to take her to make their bond stronger, to show her how much he wanted and needed her. Their union was fast, passionate, and loud.

Hiram woke the next morning. Heather was still in his arms and smiling contentedly in her sleep. He recalled how sweet she had tasted last night and hardened at the thought of tasting her in that manner again. He had never known such wild abandonment. He'd had many women in his bed over the years, but never had he felt so much—so in tune with a woman and so turned on. She had clawed at his hair while he had delighted her with many movements of his tongue. She had begged him to take her again and again. Hiram had been all too pleased to do so and was excited by her openness. Her shyness had completely vanished. She had been like a different woman, only she wasn't. *She is my woman*, Hiram thought with pride and delight. But such a difference from their wedding night. Then she had clung to the covers, as if ashamed to be naked. Hiram had even struggled to touch her, forcing his way beneath the covers. He knew she had enjoyed it, even though she'd felt nervous. Her soft moans as they'd made love had told him that much, but the moment they had finished, she had hurriedly clutched at the covers again, covering up that beautiful body. But last night, she had blown his mind.

He rolled her over, kissing her neck and playing with her breasts. She moaned in her sleep. He lowered his hand and played with the nub he had snacked on last night with his mouth. She had really enjoyed his lips on her, his tongue and fingers pushing into her. She had screamed so loudly he thought the whole castle might have heard her. He couldn't help but smile at how wanton his wife had become. But only ever for him. No other man would ever touch her beautiful body. She was his and they belonged together.

He played with her nipples, excited to feel them stand at attention from his gentle request. He pressed his hand against the flat of her stomach and pulled her into him, and inserted himself into her from

behind. She gasped and arched her back instinctively.

“More?” She laughed as he moved gently within her.

“So much more. I am never going to stop,” he whispered.

“Mmmm, I am going to remind you of that,” she groaned as he thrust a little harder.

He pushed into her and she wriggled with the intensity. She felt so good. So open to him. He had never known anything so pure yet so sexual at the same time.

“My woman. My wife.” He kissed her neck affectionately.

“My husband. My lover,” she replied.

Hiram began moving deeper within her, adjusting her body to give him access. There was no greater joy than this, he realized.

“Hiram...Hiram are you in there? Can I come in?” Connor’s voice echoed down the hallway.

“NOOO! Do not come in!” Hiram yelled out. Frustration fired up inside of him. He stopped his movements, tempted to just ignore his brother, but heard the insistence in his voice.

“I’m sorry love, I will have to see what he wants.”

She nodded to him, not trusting herself to speak.

Hiram pulled a dressing gown around him and opened the door.

“What is it Connor?” he asked flatly.

“There is a disturbance to the south, a rider came late last night. Apparently it is bad. We both need to go and show them who is in charge,” Connor said.

“Damn.” Hiram scowled. He was torn.

He didn’t want to leave Heather, especially now, but it was his duty to sort out any problems. At least Connor would be with him, although he didn’t want to even speak to him. Anger still raged within, but he had to pick his moment.

"I'll be down in a minute." He dismissed Connor and shut the door firmly.

"I'm so sorry. I promise I will make it up to you." He kissed her deeply, breathing in her scent, relishing her touch. He already ached for her.

Heather nodded at him, her disappointment and longing reflecting in her eyes. Hiram knew that he felt the same.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, love," he said as he closed the door behind him.



Hiram cast furtive glances at his brother. They had been riding for a few hours with a small team of trained men with them. So far, Connor hadn't even bothered to make small talk. It was as if he knew Hiram was lost in thought and had probably guessed why. Hiram was tempted to broach the subject but every time he'd considered it, he had bitten his tongue, hesitating. But why? It wasn't really the time, considering they needed to show a united front, but he also suspected Connor would just lie. Anger rose within him and he clamped his jaw together. Not even the rolling hills and sunlight peppering a trail across the landscape could lift his mood. Anger stirred within him; it was tormenting him, judging him, and in the end, it rose up out of nowhere.

"So why are you talking to my wife about orgasms?"

Connor looked at him in surprise, bringing his horse to a slow walk. "Is that what she tried to tell you? That I was being inappropriate with her? I am so sorry for you Hiram. I did not want to say anything to you about that witch. I have not approached her at all. She is the one who is being suggestive to me."

Hiram drew a deep breath. Connor was so believable, so convincing, but not this time. "Yet, you were seen and heard." He raised an eyebrow at his brother, inviting him to tell the truth.

"She really has you wrapped around her little finger. The brave

would-be Laird. Isn't it time you grew up?" Connor cast him a sideways glance. "You are not fit to be here with me. You are a wannabe brother. Half a man. Go on, have a cry."

"Watch your step brother," Hiram growled at him. "I won't take any more of your nonsense. You always were sneaky and had no respect for others. I turned a blind eye to the stories I heard about you. Mr. Innocence. Hah! That's almost funny. I know you have been threatening Heather. She's my wife, not yours, and you will stay away from her."

"She should have been mine. I am the oldest. She would have been mine to do with what I wanted had I been back, and she would have chosen me over you." Connor laughed at him.

"That's it, isn't it?" Knowing he had the answer finally, Hiram pressed on. "You are jealous. The great Connor is jealous of his little brother. Hah!" Hiram snorted. "I will tell you something right now. You *will* leave her alone."

"Or what?" Connor sneered.

Hiram lashed out, his fist connecting with Connor's jaw. The impact vibrated through his arm and he knew that the blow would have hurt. The force dislodged Connor from his horse and he hit the ground, rolling in a cloud of dust. Hiram jumped down, preparing his stance so that he could maneuver around the anticipated punches. He ducked as Connor angled a punch at him and then drove his fist upwards, connecting with his brother's ribs, knocking the air out of him. Connor crumpled to the ground temporarily while Hiram stood over him,

"Get up you coward. You are a pathetic poor excuse of a man. Get up!"

Connor launched himself at Hiram, leading with his shoulder and hitting Hiram's stomach with all his weight behind him. The sudden movement caught him off guard. The momentum dragged Hiram backwards and he lost balance with Connor's weight driving him towards an uncomfortable landing. Hiram hit the ground hard. The stony surface beneath him digging fiercely into his shoulder blades. With Connor's weight on him, Hiram struggled to move and felt his

breath constrict but managed to aim one clenched fist at his brother, catching him on the jaw. The weight behind the punch was not there, but it was enough to dislodge him. Hiram raised his right foot and pushed Connor off him, watching as he nimbly rolled back, creating space between them. He then launched himself forwards again. Prepared this time, Hiram clambered to his feet and sidestepped the forward lunge, sending Connor hurtling towards a wooden fence which splintered at his contact. His brother, winded and now bleeding from a head wound, lay dazed across the wooden planks. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a knife, snapping it into a deadly blade in seconds. Hiram felt a wave of shock ripple through him and set his jaw for what was to come.

He realized grimly that there was little worth saving about their relationship; his twin brother had crossed the line. Destiny had always predicted this moment. For a second, he allowed himself to think about their childhood and remembered, his emotions lodged in his throat, the dark-eyed cherub who everyone had fawned over even then. It had been Connor who had delighted those who had come to visit, not Hiram. He had grown used to it and it had become a subconscious acceptance, engrained within him. They might look alike but Connor had charm; it oozed from every pore even back then. Hiram had often yearned for that inner quality but now he knew without a doubt that the charming streak was an evil thread running through him. He had been born manipulative. Suddenly, Hiram realized it wasn't what he lacked but what Connor lacked—compassion, loyalty, and honor. He felt himself instinctively grow taller and squared his shoulders. In that second, his confidence shone from him like a badge and he wore it with pride. His eyes darkened and flashed his defiance. He wouldn't back down this time.

He charged at Connor, taking him by surprise, and wrestled him to the ground, but not before he felt the cold steel piercing his skin. But he was only aware of it as his blood splashed across the shocked features of Connor beneath him. Then pain burst into his consciousness and he let Connor push him away.

Connor faltered for a moment and the anger in his eyes subsided. He put the knife away.

“Sorry, brother,” he said. “I went too far. It won't happen again.” He looked at Hiram's bloodied face and pulled himself upright. “Once we sort the problem out with these usurpers, I am going to pack my stuff and get out of your life for good this time.”

Hiram nodded and stood up, wiping his cheek with his sleeve. Red soaked into the fabric immediately and he knew the cut was bad. He drew in a deep breath. “I think that would be best for everyone.”

He glanced at the men all around him. They were wary and a little shocked. They had been prepared to pull them apart, but they had not expected the violence that ensued. *Not surprising*, Hiram thought. They had all been hiding Connor's true self for years and yet now, it had been revealed for all to see. In some ways, Hiram felt justified by the event, but he also knew it was far from over. Connor had given up too easily. There were witnesses and that was not what he would want.

Connor was sneaky and Hiram knew he must not turn his back on him for a second. He also knew he would have to be vigilant over Heather. Connor would revel in sexually abusing her. He would see it as a victory over his brother that he too had known her intimately and had defiled what was good between them. Even though he loved Heather with all his heart, he knew that Connor could break their marriage and destroy their happiness if he forced her to comply with his demands. It wasn't that he would blame her in any way, but that insidious act would fester between them. Every time Hiram took her in his arms, she would be reminded of his brother. Every time he tried to make love to her, to push his body inside of hers, she would be reminded of the time Connor had raped her. In time, the chasm between them would grow. Whether they loved each other or not, Hiram feared that the actions of Connor would tear their love apart. It must not happen.

They continued their journey in silence. Hiram felt light-headed. He'd lost a lot of blood and wondered how bad the cut was. Others averted their eyes from him, and he knew that the wound would leave evidence of the actions of the day. There was still tension in the air but this time, the atmosphere had nothing to do with their emotions. The weather was turning. It felt threatening, ominous, like a dark cloud hanging over them. Storm clouds began to gather over the hills

with the wind whipping up behind them. Dust clouded the air as the cold breeze gained strength. They were in the wrong place to be caught in a deluge. Riding through a valley with hills banking off both left and right in a dramatic line. They couldn't get the horses away from this track straight away and there was nowhere to shelter. They moved the horses faster, as claps of thunder erupted on a distant horizon before the dark clouds relinquished their load and the rains came. Urging their horses on, they searched for a sheltered spot as icy cold rain soaked them to the skin.

Water ran down the back of his neck and between his shoulder blades. Rain splattered the wound on his cheek and turned his face and neck into a red stream that dripped down the front of him. Hiram shivered, not just from the bitter elements, but from the shock of their encounter. He hated him with every fiber of his being. He shivered when he thought about Connor touching Heather and again at the thought that one day he might be driven to such rage that he would kill his own flesh and blood. That would be a dark day indeed.

Camped beneath a low-hanging rock that jutted out from the side of the hill, they tethered the reluctant horses and lit a fire. Now, sitting by the campfire and warming his hands, Hiram recalled his childhood years with a deeper sense of despair than he had ever felt. As he focused on the flickering flames, he remembered his deep jealousy of his brother and how his mother had always sided with him against Hiram. It had been a painful realization that she loved one but not the other. Like Connor, she'd had such charm.

His mother was beautiful. She had a smile that lit up the room but now, with shock, he realized that it was for show. There was little warmth behind the smile. It never quite reached her eyes. She was elegant, able to interact with others easily, and had an aura. But what she gained in charm, she lacked in emotion. He realized now that he had taken after his father and Connor, their mother. Like his mother, Connor was strange. They could be all things to all people but inside, there was a bitter edge. His father had controlled her, he realized suddenly. Whenever she had become volatile in her temperament, she had been ushered away and there would be days when he had not seen her. At times, his father had looked strained. He would merely

say that she was unwell, had a headache, or needed time on her own. Hiram grew up with servants to tend to his needs.

Hiram could only wonder if there was madness in his family. It hadn't always been unhappy. There were four children—one had died when young—and now there was his sister Maggie and brother Connor. He wasn't that close to them; Maggie was the one who he would turn to but even so, only Connor seemed tainted by whatever afflicted their mother.

Hiram and Connor were opposite sides of a coin. He had been more studious and serious. Connor, on the other hand, had been the one to make them all laugh. It had won him all the friends, and everyone had wanted to be around him, except for Hiram. He had wanted to be alone. When Connor had been sent away, Hiram had rejoiced. He had felt free from the constraints forced upon him by his brother. But that stopped today. Hiram was a match for his brother now. He stole a glance at Connor, who was sitting on the other side of the fire, his face brooding. Connor would have to move on and get the hell out of his life. Hiram was happy, he was his own man and respected. There was no place for the seeds of madness in his life unless it manifested in his own child. Hiram felt the chill of worry ripple through him.

Wearing an impassive face, Connor sat squarely on his horse, knowing that he was going to attack Hiram the moment he had a chance. This time, without witnesses, that knife would sink deep into his belly. He would at first stab him where it would not kill him, only weaken him. It would be a game, seeing how long Hiram could take the brunt of the blade. Then, he would cut him so that he bled profusely. He'd felt excited by the savage wound on Hiram's face. His knife had cut through skin with ease and there was no doubt that he would be scarred for life. The thought pleased him.

He could make it look like an accident. Go out riding with him, smashing that pig-headed skull in. Then, when consciousness began to dawn, Connor would push him over a rocky edge and drop him down the side of the valley. Bleeding, he would not make it back out. His brother would suffer an agonizing death. As his imagination soared, his ideas took on a more sinister story. He could wait until they were back and creep into his brother's quarters at night, sticking the knife deeply into this back. Then, as the blood drained out of him, he would make him watch as he mounted that bitch of a bride. Connor smiled to himself. He would take her. It would be hard, painful, and so pleasurable to him.

He hated women at the best of times, although needed them for sex. He had hurt so many over the years, but as the Laird's son, he had gotten away with it, until the last time when he had been sent away. He'd hated his father for that. If he hadn't died on the battlefields, Connor would have liked to have been the one who had murdered him. He'd always taken Hiram's side over his. His mind went back to the moment of Hiram's anticipated death scene. Heather, slowly

starting to wake up, realizing that the gurgling sound was her beloved husband dying beside her. As realization dawned, he would take her repeatedly, ruining her for good. Then he would discard her.

She would be a broken woman begging him to let her go, and when he did, she would beg him to take her back. *That bitch doesn't deserve the crumbs from my table*, he thought bitterly. Let alone a place in his house. He knew he was jealous, angrily so. It hurt him that she wanted Hiram and not him. But as the eldest, she should have been given to him and not to that pathetic brother of his. Rage fired up within him. He scowled, gritted his teeth, and guided his horse through the pathway of stones and rocks that were disturbed from the hills. And yet, the rest of his mind was still preoccupied with his revenge. He pictured her beneath him. His tongue exploring her. Perhaps he would give her some pleasure. Make her become addicted to him. Make her need him so much that she would choose him over Hiram. Then, when he had destroyed their love, he would discard her anyway, like a toy. He smiled. So many plans, which would he choose? If he killed Hiram, his mother would have him back permanently. She loved him so much. He would be the Laird and then the rules of the game would be much different.

Connor glared at Hiram, who was riding slightly ahead of him. He let his rage shine through his eyes like dark pools, hiding his sinister self. His time would come. He would have it all and his brother would be left with nothing. All he had to do was bide his time. Pretend to be sorry, pretend to make it up to Hiram, and even apologize to Heather. He would make them believe he was leaving and then, when they least expected it, he would make his move.

The battle had been short but victorious. Connor and Hiram had fought side by side battling against those almost as good with the sword as they but after hours of bloody battle, the Rebellion had been defeated. Breathing hard, they had checked their own wounded and had even shaken hands standing over the bodies of those who had dared to defy them.

“That taught them to not mess with us.” Connor had laughed as he kicked the lifeless body of one of the men.

Hiram agreed looking at the bloodied corpses. “We’ve done what we set out to do. It is time to go back. There should be no more unrest for a while. Leave the bodies here. It will serve as a warning.”

The landscape around them was barren. The attack upon them had come swiftly. It was an ambush, well-thought-out and aggressive. Although they had been caught off guard, they had responded quickly, and their own casualties had at least not been serious. Hiram took some food and water from the saddlebags, passing it around to others. He bit into the chunky bread; it was dry but edible when washed down with fresh water. They needed something to restore their flagging energy levels.

Connor moved towards him, his face clear with malice. “I meant what I said. I am going to leave. It is better that we are apart. I hope you will give me time to sort something out?”

Hiram scrutinized Connor’s features. Damn it. He couldn't tell whether he was lying or not, even after all these years, although his gut feeling told him that he was merely being manipulated to suit Connor’s wishes.

“That’s fine, but sooner than later. I think it is best for everyone, don’t you?”

Connor nodded ruefully. “Mother will be upset.”

“She can come visit you once you are settled. Best we keep some space between us.”

“I agree,” Connor admitted. “I was a bloody fool and I might as well admit it; I was jealous. I’m older than you and...”

“By minutes,” Hiram interjected.

He shrugged. “Maybe, but it felt as if I should have been the one to marry first and then, to hear about it...well, my emotions were muddled. I think I wanted to hurt you and well, it doesn’t matter now, but I wanted you to know why.”

He turned and walked away, leaving Hiram staring after him with a confused look on his face.

It was dark by the time they returned to the castle. All were weary from their travels. It had been painstakingly slow to pick their way over stony ground knowing they couldn’t push the horses faster. The moon had at least lit the way with only scurrying clouds barring the natural light at times. Hiram felt impatient. He desperately wanted to be home and to hold Heather. He’d never felt that longing for another person before, but it reverberated throughout his very being. *This is love, real love*, he contemplated in surprise. This is what that felt like. He felt disconnected without her. He didn’t need a woman in his life, but he wanted one...he wanted her. It wasn’t about need, it was about sharing their lives together. It was so real and so deep that at times, Hiram thought he might drown in his longing for her.

He urged the horse on a little more and those around him picked up their pace too. As they approached the clearing in between the hills, he caught sight of the castle—home—and Heather would be waiting for him. Glancing at Connor, he felt a wave of understanding rise in him. Was he lonely? Deep down, had he been hoping for love or companionship? Did he envy theirs because he was without it?

Hiram shook his head. He didn’t want to think about his brother.

Anger still nestled within him and he just wanted to take his wife to bed and let their kisses make the whole world disappear for a while. He spurred the horse on, driving them forward towards the lights blinking on the hillside. Soon he would be with her and the world would be radiant again.



Heather was in bed. Her red hair cascaded over the pillow. Her face, pale in this half-light, looked so young and innocent. His heart constricted in his chest. At times, he couldn't quite believe she was his. She was deep in slumber and although he was dirty from his travels, he couldn't wait to touch her. He kissed her gently on the forehead, stroking back her hair, but she didn't stir.

Smiling, he made his way to the bathroom and began to wash. The water was nowhere near hot enough but he didn't care. He was just glad to wash away the dirt and grime and to lose the stench of dried blood. He washed quickly, scrubbing at his skin, eliminating the sorry story of that last march towards battle. As he looked at his reflection, he noticed the jagged line that rippled across his cheek. It was a reminder of his fight and would always be there. Tension gradually began to dissipate as the small bowl of water turned a murky color.

Emerging, he wrapped his naked form in a towel. He felt so much better. His muscles still ached and bruises peppered his upper body where Connor had managed to land some blows, but soon they would fade. He made his way back to the bedroom and pulled back the heavy covers. She was still asleep but as he laid down, he almost gasped as his side of the bed was cold. He moved nearer to her to steal some of her warmth and she shivered in her sleep as his cold arms wrapped around her. She smelled like heaven and he breathed in the heady aroma, drinking in her scent like a man starved of it. With his body nestling hers, he felt almost human again. Warmth emanated from her body and he lay there, contented, the coldness of his own body dissipating as he basked in the warmth from her. He didn't want to wake her, but he couldn't resist slipping his hand beneath her gown, finding her pert breasts, and cupping one in his hand. He just wanted to hold her close and like that, at ease, he fell asleep.

He awoke to movement on the bed. The room was still bathed in darkness and Heather was awake, sitting on top of him. Partially seductive, partially driven by the need to be close to him, she was hugging him and kissing his neck and chest. He maneuvered her body until she brushed against his hardness and he gasped. Positioning her, he thrust inside and used his hands to guide her movements. Hiram sighed in pure pleasure. He needed this. She gave it all so willingly to him. She was wanton and innocent all rolled into one.

Her hair fell back from her face as she tilted her chin at him. He tugged at her gown and she obediently pulled it upwards. Seeing her flat stomach and perfect breasts bouncing gently as they moved in unison, Hiram felt his desire grow and matched his need to his hands where he moved her so that the two were in sync. This was like nothing he had experienced with anyone else. This total desire to please and be pleased. This need that devoured him and yet, still in his mind, was the battle to hold back until she had yielded to her own pleasure. She was close. He could feel her body tense and she was moaning softly, completely lost in the moment. As she arched her back and gave a cry, he lost his control and gave in to the roller-coaster surge of pleasure that took place within. Satiated, they both slept away the hours, unaware that Connor was standing outside their bedroom door listening to their cries of pleasure.

Heather stretched, her body aching from their bout of frenzied lovemaking. She had slept well but it had been a beautiful realization that it was not a dream. He really was holding her. In the morning, she had wanted him so badly and he had not disappointed her. They had made love over and over, sleeping in between bouts and then, when emerging from slumber, he had taken her again. She felt alive, deliciously so. He had invaded every part of her body, touching her from head to toe and kissing all exposed skin. But he had touched her heart too. Her body still sang out a song of love as she delighted in her response to his touch. He loved her. He had told her so repeatedly as if the realization made him open and honest and needing to tell her that his feelings were so genuine. It made her so happy that he felt the same way. She realized she had fallen for him so deeply. Now it was hard for her to even remember the time when she hadn't loved him. She smiled and stretched once more in the bed and curled up with the pillow that Hiram used. It smelled of him. Such a wonderful scent that made her miss him when he was not there.

He had ordered her breakfast before he'd left and she'd eaten in her room, and then had taken time to bathe. When she was finished, she curled back up in the bed, reluctant to leave her memories of their passion. She felt safe in this room. It was her haven against her fears in the castle. Hiram hadn't told her what had happened on the march, if anything, but when they had been so happy, lying in each other's arms, she had not wanted to speak about his brother. Hiram had left before she had woken again, and now sunlight burst into the room. She had no idea if Connor had even come back to the castle and couldn't deny that she wished he had been injured or, worse, had died. If he died, Hiram could mourn his loss but they could then move on with their lives. Connor was like the shadow you saw out of the

corner of your eye but when you looked, he was gone, and you were left wondering if he had been there at all. He was the conniving face at the window, the presence in the mist. He was evil. Heather shivered. She didn't doubt his words. He meant them, but she couldn't understand why.

The brothers were so different. Hiram made her feel beautiful, but she wasn't sure that she was in the typical way. She was tall, taller than most women and bigger in build. She considered herself slim but curvy, perhaps athletic in that her body was toned. Her red hair had a mind of its own and tumbled down over her shoulders in waves. Hiram thought she was beautiful and that was all that mattered to her. Connor, like a precious little child, just wanted what was not his. *He is jealous of Hiram*, she suddenly realized. In some ways, that made sense. But it wasn't about her. In Connor's eyes, she was possession, a commodity to be traded or discarded. He wanted to be the Laird and he would have taken her as his wife but there would have been no real connection between them. She would have been used for her body only. Heather shivered. Thank goodness he had been away when they had arranged the marriage.

Now dressed, Heather wore a jade green dress that hinted at her curves without revealing too much. The color was a perfect contrast against the red of her hair and her creamy pale skin. She slipped her feet into little flats and left the room cautiously. There was no sound along the corridor or anywhere else. She made her way down the huge staircase, hugging the wall as she moved gracefully down it. There were no servants bustling about, no sign of Hiram's sister, and no sign of Connor. She breathed a sigh of relief. Moving past centuries worth of old oil paintings, ancestors who glared down at her disapprovingly, she headed out the open front door and walked past the carefully-tended lawns of the brightest green even on this slightly dull day. The gardeners had been busy creating seasonal flower displays, she noted, and the colors lifted her spirits as she walked by. Heather suddenly realized she had missed spending time gardening, although it had been mainly growing her favorite plants.

Back home, at the house of her childhood, she corrected, she'd had

her own plot of land, even though her father had disapproved of the idea at first. She'd grown herbs and flowers and had used tending the garden as therapy. It had just been a small plot but it had given her pleasure to work the land a little. There was something so gratifying about the feel and smell of soil and the gentle fragrance of flowers that began to bloom. Perhaps she would discuss with Hiram that she could have a little plot, although she was sure that it would be frowned upon by some. It just wasn't traditional for a laird's wife to provide manual labor and yet, for her, it was a labor of love, a way to relax. She could see Hiram sitting on an old carved bench looking out wistfully across the hills. She trailed a hand across his shoulders and he looked up, surprised to see her there, a mischievous smile spreading across his features.

"Oh, my word. Hiram, your face!" she gasped.

Self-consciously, he raised his fingers to the angry line, now puckered and raised as the wound began to heal itself. "I had forgotten about this for a moment."

"Are you okay my love? You got this in battle? " she asked tenderly.

"Connor."

The word sent a ripple of fear down her spine. "He did this to you?"

"Brotherly love, you know." He tried to smile but when he did so, the wound, taut across his cheek, made him flinch. "He will be leaving soon. That's all you need to know."

She suppressed her curiosity, knowing that Hiram did not want to talk about it just yet. She nestled into his arms and let the sunlight cast its healing spell over them.

"I am surprised to see you up and about. I was sure that I had exhausted you today." His fingers dug deep into her shoulder as she squeezed her affectionately.

Heather's eyes sparkled in reply. "I certainly was, and may I request that you do the same every single day?"

He reached across to kiss her lips. "My lady, I would be most honored." He pulled her closer and kissed her fully, taking control of her lips, his tongue invading her mouth, teasing her. "Mmm. My wanton wife. What man could ask for more?"

"You could ask for more anytime you please." She grinned at him.

"I will make it my life's work to satisfy you." He laughed with delight. "That day we met at our engagement party, I had no idea just how amazing you would be in the bedroom. I might have been tempted to whisk you away then, had I known."

"I thought you were going to kiss me. Do you remember? You stared at me with such intent and I thought, desire."

"Aye, I was. I was torn between being a gentleman and seducing you right there," he admitted to her, and pulled her close. They sat in peaceful silence, looking over the distant hills where clouds scurried and threatened to dampen the greenness of the landscape.

"I love this place," Hiram breathed. His eyes were dark, appreciative.

"Aye, it's beautiful," Heather admitted.

"I could never leave this place. It's a part of me."

"Do you think you might have to?" She frowned suddenly, sitting up to question him.

"Not me. Connor."

She waited for him to share the details with her, aware that her heart was thumping beneath her ribs.

He drew in a deep breath. "The fight was bad. He pulled a knife on

me.”

Heather gasped, her hand across her mouth in horror.

“It caught the side of my face but in that moment, he realized the craziness of the situation. He put the knife away and has since apologized. I realized something though. There is something wrong with him. Something missing. There is a madness. I think he inherited it from mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Oh yes, I believe Father kept her under control all these years. You have noticed that she is aloof with me but all over Connor?”

Heather recalled his mother’s rejection of him when he had announced that his father had died. She had thought it was just shock, but now...

“Mother has always been...difficult. Her love for Connor is overwhelming. Maybe she sees a part of herself in him, something that is not there in me. It used to hurt me so badly that I wasn’t loved as much. In fact, I had no idea what real love was until you came along.” He reached out and squeezed her hand.

“But your father...?”

“Oh yes, he was a strong, disciplined man, but his heart was in the right place. I think he loved mother, but he also knew that there was a side to her that he did not like. He controlled her which was a good thing and it was he who sent Connor away, but he had a lot of affection for me. I think I am quite like him.”

“From the little I saw of him, I think so too.” Heather breathed a sigh of relief. “He is someone that I could have respected. I see the same qualities in you. I am so glad you are the way you are. It is very sad for your mother if she cannot see you for the wonderful man you are. She is missing out. But know this Hiram...I have enough love to give

you to make you feel like the most loved man in the world.” She paused, her fingers tracing the outline of his hand. “What would I have done if I had been married to Connor?” She shuddered visibly.

“I do not believe it would have happened. Father was a good man; he would have made sure Connor did not marry. You were chosen for many reasons. Beauty, personality, charm, and of course, that our union secures the future of both lands. Connor could never look after a woman. Father sent him away hoping it would act as a wake-up call that if he continued to misbehave then he would be cut off without a penny, or worse.”

“So, what happens now?”

“Connor has apologized and admitted he was driven by jealousy. He wanted you. He wanted to be the Laird, really. He is driven by the need to have the power but has asked for a little time to prepare some plans and he will go. I have granted him a little time to do this. Mother will then be able to visit him.”

The sun moved out from behind a cloud, still pale, yet strong enough to warm the area around them. Heather turned her face upwards, the air warm against her skin. “So it will all turn out okay?”

“Aye my love. It will indeed.”



Two weeks had passed, and Heather had forgotten about Connor and his threats. He had spent much of his time in his room or had been away. He had spoken to Hiram and explained he would be coming and going for a while until he could sort out a place to stay and had been making enquiries about going to England. If he could find a suitable place then he would be moving out as soon as he could.

Hiram had merely nodded. He preferred this slightly subdued side to Connor and hoped that it was genuine. It seemed to be. He made no effort to contact Heather, not even to apologize, but Hiram was glad

of that. He knew she was too. He'd seen her at her most terrified and now he was watching her relax again. It was as if much of the strain had dissipated from her and she was blossoming before his eyes. Although he spent a lot of time out visiting some of the workers and checking out their cottages, Heather had refused to stay at the castle, this time not through fear, but because she wanted to take on her duties seriously. In time, she would oversee the castle when he was away and so she wanted to get to know all the tenants.

Heather, although not a natural horsewoman, could ride adequately enough to accompany him over the moors. She'd had no idea the boundaries of their land were so extensive and most days they galloped across the open areas, trying to compete. Her balance was good, but her technique wasn't. Hiram knew she would benefit from lessons but it was enough that she was enjoying the outdoor life with him. He gained such a sense of pleasure from spending time with her and realized how lucky he was. Not many women would take to this lifestyle in such a way. He remembered with a smile just how painful she found the saddle when sitting on it for long periods of time. Her discomfort had been obvious when they had returned to their room to get changed. She had winced as she had bent forward. Hiram smiled with barely concealed joy; he had offered to distract her and to help her forget her bruises, and he had. They'd made love for hours and her cries of pleasure must have rippled around the castle walls.

She was coming over to meet him at one of the cottages later that day. It would be the first time out on her own, but she was ready for the challenge. He had a lot to do on the land and if things had been different, it would have really helped to have had Connor by his side. He shrugged, while Connor might have realized his ways, he wouldn't have drastically changed, and it was best for him to go. It did mean a lot more work and responsibility lay at his door though but in some ways, he relished the challenge. He made his way to the stables and mounted the horse the stable boy had made ready for him. Unaware that he was being watched, he cantered out across the open expanse of lawn, his horse snorting in anticipation as he held him back, until they were beyond the castle grounds.

It had been the loneliest few weeks of his life. Even though he had made every effort to be polite and to change his ways, not once had Hiram suggested that he stay. How much longer did he have to wait? The truth hit him. Hiram had lost respect for him. He didn't trust him. Worse, it was possible that he could see through the ruse. Connor frowned, staring out the window as Hiram galloped across the moors. She was alone then. Probably languishing in their quarters after yet another torrid lovemaking session. He'd been lurking in the corridor hoping that Hiram would have left early but he'd heard her giggle and then shriek, and knew that Hiram was there. Temptation to listen at the door had been too much to resist, although it was not the first time he had heard her scream in pleasure. He'd felt a wave of jealousy because deep down, he still wanted her for himself. He knew it was wrong. He had tried to fight it. But it existed like a tight knot within him. He desperately wanted to take her and make her his own. When she'd cried out Hiram's name at the end of the frenzied session, Connor had crept away, gritting his teeth and tightening his hands into fists.

He didn't love Heather. But he couldn't deny a sexual attraction. If she was his wife, she would know her place. He would give her plenty of attention in the bedroom though, and he felt that was what she needed. Deep within, she had the sexual appetite of a whore. She was lucky that she was a laird's daughter otherwise she may have needed to use that aspect of herself to satisfy others. He would make her produce child after child for him and he would give her as much attention as she needed, but he would keep another supply of women for those more brutal acts. At least until Heather had given him all he needed. Once childbearing was over, it would be easy enough to get rid of her if need be.

Hiram gave her far too much control. He'd heard she had been teaching one of the servant brats to read. Now she wanted some land of her own for growing flowers and she was joining his brother on trips to see the tenants regularly. Connor sneered. She thought she was acting in the right way, but she should know her place. If she'd

been given to him, she would have barely left the castle. Because of his desire to possess her, it fitted into his plan that he would keep her busy being pregnant. She would provide him with the children he wanted, although there was no desire to be involved in the “bringing up the children” chores, but he yearned to be a father. To have that status, to know he had created them. It was like being God. He had the power of creation. He wanted five children at the very least. He’d noticed Heather had childbearing hips. She would conceive his children and when she was too pregnant to succumb to his desires, he would find a lover on the side. He had a plan of sorts which meant his dear brother would have to die.

Connor had never been a man who stuck with one woman. No one had ever made him feel that he needed to. His father had controlled his mother, but he knew that even so, there had been love between them. His mother was not like most women; there was an aloofness inside her and yet, somehow, she had developed feelings for his father. She’d been devastated when he had died. That was for sure. But Connor was equally sure that most of her love was for him.

So many women had flirted with him over the years. They thought he was charming and rich—of course, as the Laird’s son, they would never say no to him. But he would have liked it if they had, that was far more fun. So far, he’d played nicely with Heather. But he couldn’t control it for much longer. The desire within him was becoming more powerful. If she played it smart, he would make it feel good for her, at first. She would realize he could overpower her and would give in to her desires for him. If she fought him, he would be happy to see the fear in her eyes. Women, after all, were made just to be the vessels for men’s frustrations.

Over the years, he had lashed out at a few women. They had been frantic to get away from him, so he had to subdue them. If he needed to do the same to Heather, so be it. His mother had taught him that he could take anything he wanted in life. He had always been her favorite...well, he had until Patrick Jr., but that little problem had been taken care of.

“Oh, the memories!” He laughed.

If his mother ever found out the truth about Patrick’s death, she would hate him for his actions, but Connor knew that she loved him so much, she was almost addicted to him. Although he shouldn’t have done so, he wouldn’t change the outcome of Patrick’s death. It had been necessary. It was his secret to carry.

Heather filled his mind again. What was it about her? It had never happened to him in the past, and he didn’t like this deep attraction to her. Connor had always been drawn to the forbidden. He just didn’t know why. He wondered if she was still in her room, or if she was more relaxed because he had stayed away from her, she would have ventured out into the garden. As he glanced out of the window again, Connor saw Heather, her back upright, concentration on her face. She was riding one of the more docile of the mares, but Connor knew this one was still quite feisty. Heather didn’t look overly confident, but her form had improved. She moved with the horse now. He guessed she might be heading to see Hiram.

“Like hell,” he said out loud.

Changing his clothes quickly, Connor rushed down to the stables, saddled his own horse, and quickly mounted. The stable hands were occupied elsewhere and Connor was glad of this. It was probably best he wasn’t seen.

The sun was still a mellow ball hanging high in the sky and the breeze had settled as Connor rode out from the castle. The black stallion had been one of his favorite rides and he relished letting him off the reins and going for a gallop across the moors. There was no sign of Heather and he wished he had known which direction she had gone, but this was all part of the chase, of course, so it didn’t truly matter if he didn’t catch her today. The stallion accelerated and Connor felt a ripple of pleasure rush through him. He felt the horse’s power, its energy, and he urged the horse on, the hooves pounding over the grassy scrublands. Connor felt alive. There was a buzzing in his ears but his brain was so sharp that every thought and every desire

intensified, and became crystal clear. More so when he saw Heather not far ahead of him. He urged the horse on, and they gave chase.

Ahead of him, Heather had turned her head and realizing it was him, she had spurred her horse into action. Adrenaline burst through him, his heart was beating and his anticipation of the chase grew. It seemed as if they rode like the wind chasing down mile after mile of open expanse until Heather's horse faltered at the hedgerow and she slipped from the saddle, landing heavily on the hard ground beneath her. As Connor slowed his horse down and dismounted easily, he tied the tether to a nearby branch and walked towards her.

"Not the best ending to our little race." He grinned impishly at her.

"I wasn't racing. I was just trying to get away from you," she told him crossly. "What the hell do you think you were doing?"

"I wanted to catch up with you," Connor said in surprise. "It was obvious wasn't it?"

"Why?" Heather demanded. She was still sitting on the ground, rubbing her arm.

Connor knelt by her side. "Are you hurt?" He reached out to touch her arm.

She pulled back immediately. "Don't touch me."

He recoiled at the venom in her voice. "I was just checking you were okay." He stood up and offered her a hand so she could stand. Reluctantly, she reached up and he pulled her to her feet. She was shaken but not hurt, and released her hand from Connor's immediately.

"Why are you following me?" she demanded, aware that he towered above her and was still standing so close to her. She could almost feel his breath on her skin.

He swallowed hard and resisted the urge to force her back down to the ground, he stepped back from her, afraid he would act out on his desires. "I saw you ahead of me and thought if I chased you down, it would give Shadow a good work out. I didn't mean to scare you. I wanted to apologize. I should have known better than to do it this way." He shrugged ruefully. "I sometimes don't think."

He seemed sincere but she couldn't believe it. "No harm done, but I need to find Hiram, he is expecting me." She hobbled over to her horse, who was waiting patiently for her, and tried to haul herself up but her muscles were bruised and stiff from her fall.

"Here." Connor held out his hand and pushed her up as she took the weight through her leg.

She nodded to him and then turned the horse and began to head towards her destination. Connor watched her go, wondering why he hadn't just taken her. He could have done it. There was no one around for miles. Hiram would never have made it here on time. She had been his for the taking. He felt his desire begin to course through him again. Even now, he could pull her down from the horse...did he want to do that? He shook his head in confusion. He didn't know what he wanted. That was the trouble. He wanted her but he enjoyed the chase more. Sighing, Connor moved back over to his horse and patted him on the neck before swinging his body agilely up onto the saddle. He watched Heather moving further away from him and reluctantly turned his horse in the other direction and made his way slowly back to the castle.

“*H*e didn’t touch you did he?” Hiram was aghast that Connor had chased after her.

“Only to help me get up actually,” she admitted. “He doesn’t seem to understand personal space though.” She remembered his hot breath against her skin.

“What did he want?”

“Apparently, to say sorry. He said he had been giving Shadow a good run and chased me. But he admitted he often gets things wrong and he did back off when he realized I was feeling uncomfortable.”

“Maybe he has learned.”

Hiram thought for a moment, wondering if there was the potential for his brother to change. He wanted to think that was the case but, deep down, his gut told him otherwise. They were back in their quarters, a large bedroom with an adjoining bathroom and sitting room with a large comfortable sofa. Most of the time they were together there, they simply went to bed and talked, or made love. Hiram grinned. They didn’t need a huge castle to be happy, they just needed a giant bed.

“What are you thinking?” she asked quizzically as she stepped out of her clothes.

“Oh,” Hiram breathed heavily. “That’s quite a bruise.” He pointed to her hip, thigh, and bottom with a purple mass that was still formulating.

“It hurt...a lot. Not just to my physical self but my pride too. Still, no long-term harm done.”

Slipping into her gown, Heather climbed onto the bed, wrapping one leg around Hiram's, and molded her body to his shape. He slipped his arm around her shoulders and she nestled against his warmth.

"I am glad you weren't hurt and that Connor wasn't deliberately trying to frighten you this time. I just don't understand him. I wish he would just go and then, we could get on with our lives. He's done so much damage to this family."

"I think it is time you told me," she stated simply. "I want to know more about your life."

Hiram sighed. "Connor was the one that everyone adored. I was the quiet, studious one and as a result, I missed out on a lot of attention. It wasn't until my fight with Connor the other day that I realized it wasn't me who had something missing in life, it was him. He was doted on, adored, loved. But he is not complete. Something is broken inside, damaged. He needs that attention. He believes he can take whatever he wants. He knows that others will cover up for him."

"In what way?"

"He was seeing a girl from the nearby village. Pretty little thing, quite sweet. She really liked him and I thought, well, we all thought he liked her too. At least, he did until he realized she liked him. His reasoning changed. He demanded sex. When she said she wasn't ready, he took what he wanted."

Heather gasped. "He raped her?"

"She said so. She was certainly shaken. But, he refuted it. Said it must have been someone else. Apparently, it was dark, and he felt she had made it all up to cover up for her infidelity. Mother even asked me if I would take the blame. I, of course, said no."

Heather sat up. "Your *mother* wanted you to be blamed for raping someone? What sort of mother is she?"

"One only capable of loving one son, it would seem." Hiram seemed matter-of-fact about it.

"Why was he sent away?"

“That was father’s doing. He’d had enough. He was appalled by the way Connor was acting and equally appalled that mother had this needy, clingy infatuation with him.” Hiram shrugged. “But now of course, I must be strong and make the decisions. It won’t always be easy.”

Heather realized that Hiram’s mother was completely blinded by her love for Connor. She couldn’t see him for the vile creature he really was. She had convinced herself otherwise. Connor could do just about anything in front of her and she would cover it up.

“Let’s forget about him. He’s a dark cloud on the horizon. A blot on the landscape. But we are perfect, here, in this room. Just us against the world.”

Heather laughed. “We are rather perfect aren’t we?”

“Even more so, if you would see to the needs of your husband sometimes,” Hiram teased and pulled her into his lap, kissing her deeply. His hands roamed over her breasts and he played with her nipples, lowering his mouth, sucking on them both in turn. She moaned and ran her fingers through his hair.

He licked a clear path to her sex. She moaned as she thought of what was about to happen. Hiram licked her some more until she screamed his name.

She pulled him up into her arms and kissed him. “Hmm, I must try to be less vocal.” She smiled.

“Yes, I do, and you screamed beautifully. I hope he heard it,” Hiram said angrily as he pushed into her. He was rough at first, and she took it. She liked this strong side to him and yielded to his demands. As the fire within him subsided, Heather rolled him onto his back and slid herself on top of him. She wanted to take control for a while.

She kissed his neck as she rocked her pelvis back and forth on him. She felt her excitement building up as she moved on his hardness. “You know I love you, Hiram. I want to have a child soon.” She broached the subject she had wanted to talk to him about for some time now.

He stopped her movement on top of him. "My love, we haven't been very careful yet. I am surprised you are not with child already," he said.

She smiled down at him.

Hiram studied her and finally figured out what she meant. "Really, are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, I asked for the doctor today." She smiled.

"I had thought you were looking a bit fuller around the belly." He laughed and ducked so that she missed him.

She continued her movement now on top of him. Gyrating her hips knowing that as she did so, Hiram was watching the full movement of her breasts. Her moans filled the air as he grabbed her hips and easily lifted her off him and lowered her again. Bringing her down on him as hard as he could.

Heather screamed as her body sped straight to the orgasm she knew was imminent. The orgasm was one of pure ecstasy and joy and she yelled once more as he pushed her over the edge. Hiram moaned out in his own release. They both were panting when they were done. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her neck.

"So, what shall we name our child?" she asked.

He kissed her once more and said, "Hmmm. Well, if we have a son, what about William Patrick?"

She smiled. "I like that a lot, I think it is the perfect choice. But what if it is a lass?" she asked.

He thought for a moment, and said, "Hmm, how about Heaven Leah?" he asked.

Heather said it out loud. Leaving the *h* as a silent sound, it made the name sound inspired by the heavens themselves. "Not bad. We will continue to think about names I am sure." She hugged him. "You are going to make an amazing father."

"Have you told anyone else yet?" Hiram asked.

“No, I wanted to share this with you first. I wanted to enjoy sharing this secret with you for awhile. I love you, Hiram. I know we took a chance every time we made love, but I wasn’t sure if you were ready to be a father. But, now we both have to be ready. ”

“I didn’t want them too soon as I wanted us to have time together, but I really do want many children with you.” He laughed.

She gave him that look, the one that meant she wanted him again.

“You are truly insatiable at times.” He laughed.

“Thank you.” She laughed as she started to move her hips while on top of him and he groaned aloud as they moved towards another climax together.

“That was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced,” he told her.

She shivered deeply.

“Are you okay love?” Hiram asked as he pulled her down into his arms.

“Just so incredibly happy.” She beamed at him.

But as she lay down beside him, her feelings changed, and she shivered again. It felt as if something or someone had just walked over her grave.

They woke up early the next morning still wrapped in each other's arms, suddenly remembering their exciting news. It was a lovely secret to share and now that Hiram knew, he could see the gentle swell of her belly and marveled that their child was nestled within. He felt her breasts while she lay sleeping next to him. They were full now, but he could hardly wait until they grew even fuller. He kissed her nipples, excited by the prospect that their child would also suckle from these. Her body was so beautiful, more so now he knew that she was pregnant. He kissed each nipple gently and moved his attention to her stomach, and then to the soft hair hiding her most secret place from him, and kissed her there too. It wasn't so much sexual as it was reverence and intimate. She stirred slowly, her eyes opening and a slow, steady smile erupting.

"Good morning, my love," she said sleepily.

"Time for you to get up, my beautiful wanton woman. Otherwise, I may have to punish you."

"Then I refuse to obey you, husband. I am with child, so I will stay in bed." She giggled at the sparkle in his eyes.

"Is that right Milady? You think that gives you the right to disobey your husband?" He turned her over and pulled her hips back towards him.

She gasped. "Hiram, what are..."

"Shh, my love." He pulled her back towards him so that his chest nestled against her back and maneuvered her body so that he could gain intimate access to her body. She arched her back with pleasure as he slid inside her. From this position, Hiram knew he could hold her

breasts, taking the weight of each one and controlling her movements. They fit together like a glove. It was perfect. If their bodies had been designed, the fit could not have been improved. They now moved together in unison. She was groaning as her body tightened over his, which excited him more. Soon, he would release his pleasure deep inside her. When the moment came they both cried out, their lovemaking tender, caring, and fulfilling. When it was over, he kissed her neck gently.

“Feel free to be disobedient at any time you like. I will happily teach you a lesson.” He laughed softly against her skin.

“You can be sure of that.” Heather giggled. He was still inside her, softening now, totally satiated. And she had never felt so womanly, so wonderful, or so loved.

Dressed, they made their way down the stone staircase hand in hand for breakfast. Heather hoped Connor wouldn't be there to ruin their happy moment and sighed with relief that the room was empty. Relieved, they sat down and the servants appeared as if by magic, setting their food in front of them. Heather was contemplative as she ate. She could understand Hiram's desire for his mother's approval, but she also imagined that he was growing less patient about her ways. She hoped that once the baby came along, that would happen. It was something that so far, Connor had not been able to achieve.

The mellow start to the day broke when Connor rushed into the room, his face agitated.

“Hiram, we have a disturbance, it is the Southern border again. We need to go and quell this right away.”

Heather grabbed Hiram's arm as he went to stand up. “I don't want you to go so soon,” she pleaded with him.

“It is my duty, love,” Hiram apologized and squeezed her hand. Heather followed him out of the room. She needed him with her for longer.

“I know my love. I want to be here with you too. But at least Connor will be gone too,” Hiram told her once they were in their chamber.

She helped him with his armor and kissed him. "I know love, it is just with our news, we should be enjoying it together." She smiled.

Connor approached as they made their way to the stables. "Bad news. There are two groups who are making their way here. I propose to take a team to the other side to cut them off and you take your group to stop them progressing forward. Whoever finishes first will help the other."

Heather felt the skin prickle on the back of her neck, and anxiety pulsed through her.

Connor continued. "I will take Andrew, Griff, William, and Donald, and you take the others?"

Hiram contemplated for a moment and then nodded.

"Be careful," Heather whispered once Connor had moved away. "It could be a trap."

Hiram nodded. "I will have six men with me. They are good men and loyal. Do you understand? I will come home."

Heather grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "No, Hiram, it is wrong. Something isn't right," she pleaded.

"It is okay lass; I will be just fine. I promise you I will come back to you." He whispered the last bit into her ear. She felt the truth of his statement and knew he must be aware of how wrong this felt too.

She cried as she watched him ride away and held her tummy protectively. With her eyes misted over, she left the stables and bumped into Maggie, Hiram's sister.

"Are you okay?" Maggie could see how pale she was. "You are trembling."

"Maggie, no, I think something is very wrong. There is more and more trouble and it doesn't make sense. My union with Hiram was supposed to settle the unrest but it is getting worse. I need to learn how to defend myself. To learn how to fight, I mean. Hiram and Connor are going up against an uprising again but what if some rebels make it here?"

Maggie nodded. "I understand. These are difficult times. I have been thinking the same. I have been having lessons in defense. We will go together instead. Nothing like being prepared."

Maggie took her to the man who would train them. He was methodical in his approach but gentle with them. She soon realized there were many self-defense moves that could help her to protect herself. "I wish I could be with Hiram now in case he needs extra help."

Maggie looked at her quizzically. "They have a large team of men, including Connor, and so that should be enough to deal with any trouble."

"They are splitting up. Connor has one team and Hiram the other. I am so worried." Heather could see the anxiety in Maggie's eyes. "I'm sorry, I don't want to worry you..."

Maggie shook her head. "I know how you feel. I also know what you have been going through. You think that Connor will not protect Hiram. I believe you to be right. However, Hiram is aware of this. We must continue to practice should any rebels get here, but I am confident that they won't. Or, is it Connor you are worried about?"

Heather nodded.

Maggie hugged her. "I saw him attack you that day. I will keep a lookout for when he is around. He has been better lately though, so perhaps his change of behavior is genuine?"

Heather nodded. "I hope so. He terrifies me. I have felt so alone." She felt as if a weight lifted off her chest. She wasn't the only one and it felt good to know.

"No, you are not alone. But you must not tell Mother. She will not see it and it will only cause you trouble," Maggie said, her eyes sorrowful.

"What did he do to you?" Heather asked, sensing that Maggie's story went deep.

Maggie laughed bitterly. "Apart from the beatings when I was young, it wasn't me he did it to, but Annabelle, a friend of mine. He had asked her out on a date and she was so excited. All she could do was

talk about how happy she was, and I remembered that she had always had a crush on Connor, and he had finally noticed her. She was on top of the world. But, he hurt her badly that night, I mean, physically, and she came to me. She cried about what he had done to her and I felt sick. She was terrified and he had made her promise to keep quiet. But when I confronted him, he told me she had thrown herself at him and that he was disgusted with her.”

Maggie sighed. “He was lying of course. She was covered in bruises. So, I told her that she must say something, that this wasn’t right. I talked her into telling my father about the crime. He was furious. He asked Connor about it and Connor lied right to his face. He said that she had wanted to sleep with him but expected marriage and when he refused, she had started spreading lies about him.”

Maggie drew a deep breath. “My father could see the fear in the girl’s eyes when Connor spoke and he wanted to get to the truth of what had really happened. My mother, she was not happy at all, she yelled at my father for hours. I feared that Connor might hurt my friend, so I went to her and promised to help keep her safe. I never realized at that point how far my mother would go to protect Connor. She came to visit Annabelle that night and left her a message and a weapon. My mother had talked her into being so ashamed for losing her virginity, even though Connor had abused her. Annabelle blamed herself for the attack, thanks to my mother, and she killed herself. It was my fault, but I will always hate both Connor and my mother for their parts in this story too.”

Tears shone in her eyes. The memory was still so raw.

Heather hugged her and let her cry. She didn’t know what to say to her but knew that just by holding her, she was giving her some support. What it did mean was that Connor and his mother were both completely unscrupulous. Hiram had mentioned madness of a sort and now Heather feared he might be right.



The next morning dawned brightly. Heather recalled the conversation she’d had with Maggie. It seemed impossible that Connor had been

saved after raping that girl. Even if her intention had just been to save her son, how could his mother have been so cruel to the victim? Sure, she was overly indulgent about her son, but was there no end to her willingness to overlook his crimes? Heather felt her blood run cold. She'd been right to fear him, and it seemed that there would be no protection from her mother-in-law.

Deep within, there was an utterly cold and evil streak. He was certainly capable of taking what he wanted. She'd heard that some men liked the chase and enjoyed living dangerously, that when a woman said no, it really meant yes. She'd experienced that herself a long time ago. Heather felt her stomach lurch at the memory as it surged to the surface. She fought it down. Swallowing hard, she regained her composure. She'd long forgotten that time and didn't want it to resurface again.

Did Connor not have any guilt? No regrets? Of course, part of the responsibility lay at his mother's feet. She'd as good as killed that girl with her behavior, anything to protect her precious son. How could she condone rape? No sane woman would do that surely. But then, unbidden, her eyes fell to her own tummy and she ran her hands across the slightly swollen belly and thickening waistline. How far would she go to protect this little one?

If she had a boy, she would protect him from the whiles of all those wanton women out there who would be after the Laird's son and teach him to protect and respect all those he met. He would be charming and kind. He would be loving. In fact, her son would grow up to be exactly like Hiram, and that filled her with great joy. If she had a daughter, she would be taught to respect others but to forge her own path in life. If she wanted to climb trees, she could. If she wanted to dig in the garden and get dirty, she would. Heather grimaced; there were things in life that gave such pleasure. Tending the land, even if on a tiny scale, appreciating the simplest crawling bug, and seeing the fruits of your own endeavors. Although she had been brought up as a lady, she'd still had relative freedom when young too. Her child would have all those good things to form the foundations of growth. Whether boy or girl, this child would be loved.

She leaned against the wall, still nurturing that tummy which showed

no real external signs of change, but Heather could feel her body changing. She felt different too. From the night of her marriage when Hiram had gently made love to her for the first time, and during those hundreds of other times when he had entered her body, she had wondered if she might conceive. She smiled wickedly. They had made love so much and never once considered protecting against pregnancy—and now, within them, a product of that love. A secret for now, until she started to show, and then it would be too difficult to hide it. Her emotions were already starting to run riot. She wanted to cry although couldn't say it was because of anything in particular. She would do anything to defend this unborn child. Could loving something so much drive you to act irrationally?

Since moving to the castle and marrying Hiram, Heather had very little to do with his mother. She'd not had the opportunity to break through that reserved air she carried with her. She had been much worse since Hiram's father had died, of course. Had practically become a hermit, reluctant to leave her rooms. That was understandable. She must feel his loss terribly and wondered if that would make her lean on Connor more? How would she feel if she thought Hiram was driving him away?

Lady MacGregor was wandering alone in the garden. Her pose was filled with angst. She was looking out over the moors, probably longing to catch sight of Connor. Heather doubted that she would be thinking in the same way about Hiram. She felt sad at that thought. Now, Heather remembered how she had witnessed mother and son in the garden one day not long ago. His mother had affectionately reached up and patted his hair down after the breeze had whipped his locks into an unmanageable style. Then she'd reached for his hand as if gaining strength from holding it and from feeling the warmth of his skin against her, relishing that connection between them. She had treated him like a child. Heather contemplated and wondered whether something had happened to Connor when he was young. Had it made her over-protective?

Heather wondered if Connor was as loyal to his mother. Was he even capable of genuine emotions? He had enjoyed his mother's attention that day and there had been genuine camaraderie between them, but

he was being doted on so what was not to like? Heather felt a wince of pain for Hiram. She knew that he would not receive the same level of love at all. It was so obvious as to the extent of their mother's feelings. No wonder he felt the pain of rejection so deeply.

Heather glanced back out of the window. The grounds were empty but she shivered. It felt as if the ghosts of that tainted love played out beneath their windows, captured in time due to the emptiness of their souls. She wondered if ghosts did indeed walk these corridors at night. There were often strange noises outside this room, and she recalled one time when Hiram was away, she had peered nervously into the inky blackness of the corridor outside her room where it stretched towards the turret stairs and had wondered if someone was there. She was glad that she had not seen anything or anyone.

In the distance, she could see horses galloping back towards the castle and her heart froze in sudden fear. Was this an attack on the castle or were they all returning safely from their battles? Dust clouds filled the air and it was impossible to see how many horses were running at full speed across the open expanse of land. She waited in anguish. Once the horses made it to the moors, it would be easier to see them, she knew, and she could only pray that Hiram was safe. Finally, swallowing hard, she counted the number and with some relief, realized that it was indeed the same number who had left. She continued to watch until she saw them reach the grounds, the men all looked weary, but Hiram dismounted easily, handing his reins to the young stable boys and then disappearing, his long strides making short work of the path. She hoped he was on his way to see her, relief washing over her in waves.

She was right. In no time, he was in their room, grinning at her mischievously. "Who are you spying on?"

"Ghosts," she told him, turning from the window and reaching up to hold her husband's precious face in her hands. "I am so glad you have returned safe."

He kissed her softly. "As am I my love. All is okay."

"What ghosts did you see? There must be many of them here."

“Not really ghosts, just a thought. I remembered seeing your mother and Connor out there one day. He was enjoying the attention she bestowed upon him. She seemed to revel in his presence. It was a tainted love. I wondered if the impression made a difference on this place. Like hatred seeping into the fabric of the walls of this castle... their love for each other, which is faulty...tainted...also seeping into the grounds, like ghosts one day to reappear.”

“I know what you mean. There is madness within them. The more I think about it, the more I believe they have both been tainted by it. If I knew more about the generations of family on my mother’s side, I wonder what I would find.”

Heather shivered. “Do you really think she is mad?”

“I don’t know if I mean insane, but her love is unhealthy, ” Hiram reassured her.

“Our child will not grow up like Connor.” Heather vowed.

“Definitely not.” Hiram nestled up to her. “How many shall we have?” He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled on her hips so that she nestled against him. “How long can I keep persuading you to want me in bed?”

“That is forever then.” She sighed contentedly. Delighted by his gentle touch, Heather gave in to the moment, enjoying their closeness, until he slid his fingers up to her breasts, trying to reach the soft skin beneath her dress.

“Hiram,” she said. “Not when we are by the window!”

He laughed, bowing towards her. “Your wish is my command, your Ladyship.”

Once he had straightened up, he pulled her to him again but this time, slightly away from the window. “I don’t care if they see,” he teased her, kissing her lips. “They have probably heard you scream my name out at night anyway.” He laughed with delight while Heather blushed.

“Am I so noisy?”

“Beautifully noisy. Never change.” He smirked. “When do we tell them

our news?"

He laid his head against her breasts while he sat on the bed and hugged her to him. He was gentle now, not thinking in a sexual way, but driven by the need to hold her, to touch, and to love her.

"I would rather they didn't know for a while," she admitted. "At least until we are sure that all is okay."

"Everything is going to be perfect," he promised her. But inside, he had doubts.

It was like a worm burrowing within him. His intense joy was overshadowed by the two people outside. People who should be happy for him and for the child to come and yet, were only interested in what was good for them. He wondered what Connor would say when he found out that Heather was pregnant? He might be furious, overcome with jealousy and rage. Would that be the trigger to send him over the edge?

It didn't seem to matter how hard he pushed his steed; he couldn't outrun Connor. He could hear his brother shouting at him and pushing hard at his own horse so as to overtake him. He was just slightly behind him. Hiram could feel his presence and that intense anger directed at his back. The journey back to the castle seemed to take forever. With no one around, there was no one to bear witness to their fight. He couldn't quite remember why they were out riding together. He would never have chosen to spend time with his brother like this. A battle? An emergency? The reason for being together was just out of reach in the grey mists surrounding his brain. Yet, somehow, they were here and galloping across the moors. Connor, as usual, had turned it into a competition. But when he had looked into his eyes, he had seen that his inner rage was clearly visible. His eyes were the darkest he had ever seen, fueled by anger and jealousy. It was as if he had been hiding his true feelings about Hiram and now he could contain his hatred no more. Hiram had known in an instant that somehow Connor knew about Heather's pregnancy.

"I will kill her before I let her have your brat!" Connor had snarled.

The words resounded in his ears. He had to save Heather. His brother was mad, the sickness had taken over him. He must get back to protect Heather. Connor would hurt her; he was now completely out of control. Hiram pushed his horse as hard as he could, but Connor's horse kept pace. Every now and then, he would direct his horse against Hiram's, knocking them off course. Hiram felt his own horse stumble but manage to right itself. The terrain was difficult. It would take nothing for his horse to fall or to throw him.

"Connor, stop it!" He turned his head back to glare at him.

But he came forward again, ramming the horse against him. Hiram clutched the reins more tightly and turned to the front. The wall to the castle boundary was looming ahead of them. It was only a small wall but they needed to jump it. Hiram pulled at the reins to turn his horse, to straighten him ready for the jump, and as the horse lifted its front legs, he felt Connor against him, his horse equal to his, moving through the air, cutting him out of the route forward. They landed together and Connor reached across with his horsewhip and Hiram felt the stinging blow to his face. The force knocked him off the saddle and he landed heavily, bouncing across the ground, the wind knocked out of him. As he rolled to one side across the spongy heather, Connor had dismounted and was striding towards him.

“I will get rid of that baby. You won’t know when it will happen but trust me dear brother, that baby will not survive. Then, once it has gone, I will impregnate your darling wife. I will take her! She will be mine. Soiled goods. Do you hear me?” Connor was spitting at him, his eyes dark, madness gripping him. “Do you hear me?” He brought the whip down again and again, cutting deep welts into his face and arms.

“No, Connor, don’t!” he cried out, trying to sit up, but he was caught, tangled in something. The reins? It was the stirrups and yet, still, Connor lashed out at him. The stinging blows made him cry out in pain. Darkness enveloped him like a shroud. He gasped. He couldn’t make out where he was. Where was Connor? He put his hand up to his head, touching where Connor had whipped him. There was no blood, no sticky substance, no pain. His breath, still erratic, began to slow but he felt sick. What the hell was going on?

“Hiram?” Gentle hands enfolded him, and he felt her warmth. She kissed the side of his face. “You were dreaming.”

Hiram shuddered. “No, not a dream. A warning.”

His throat hurt, as if he had been strangled in his dreams. But, gradually, relief started to seep through into his conscious mind. Connor hadn’t threatened Heather and his unborn child. He hadn’t been thrown from the horse or whipped. An ugly dream, one born of his own fears about his brother, nothing more. He was still sweating profusely though. Hiram got up and walked around the room, trying

to wake himself out of his nightmare. His mouth was dry and he felt strangely disoriented.

“Hiram, I have never seen you like this. What were you dreaming about?”

“Connor.” His voice trembled as he said the name. Her heart sank.

“Tell me about it. My father told me a long time ago that if you face the fears of your dreams, you overcome them. Let’s do that.”

Still visibly shaken, Hiram nodded. “He was attacking me. We were out riding together but I couldn’t understand why. I wouldn’t choose to go riding with him. We were thundering back across the moors; he was chasing me, and I couldn’t get away. He was threatening you. He’d found out about the baby. He wanted you but he threatened to kill you. Then I came off the horse and...well...he was whipping me with the horsewhip. Oh, it sounds pathetic saying it like this.”

“No, it doesn’t Hiram. It shows that we are both worried about Connor and his reaction. I feel sick with dread that it will make him go crazy. Do you think your dream was a premonition?”

Hiram looked at her sharply. “No, not really...just for a second maybe, but not now.” He sighed, rubbing his face with his hands. “He is supposed to be leaving soon anyway.”

“Do you think he will? How do you think your mother will take it?”

“To be honest, I don’t give a damn. She chose Connor over me so she can happily go and stay with him. All I care about is you.”

He kissed her gently on the forehead and rested his head against hers. Such a simple thing to do and yet, it showed their bond. They had something special and no one, especially not Connor, could tear them apart.

Now that his nightmare had passed, Heather pulled him back onto the bed and wrapped her legs around him. He groaned as he felt her softness and engaged with the hardness, telling her of his excitement. He plunged deep and she called out his name, holding him to her and begging him not to stop. When they had finally finished, they cried, their emotions brimming over with happiness and trepidation.

The morning dawned and when Heather woke up, Hiram had already left. The bed felt empty without him and so she walked over to the window. It was still early; the sky was streaked with yellow and red with a pale tinge of blue. Clouds scurried low over the hills and she wondered if rain would confine her to the house. That was the last thing she wanted. She wasn't sure what to do in Hiram's absence. He had probably ridden over to see some of the tenants but now that she knew she was pregnant, she didn't want to go out riding. She'd realized how easy it would be to come off the horse, but she didn't want to tell people why she had stopped her riding sessions. It wouldn't take people long to work out why she was being careful. The servants gossiped; they were probably waiting to hear the news of her pregnancy, looking out for the signs. Some women became pregnant on their wedding night but she was glad that she had not. It had been pure luck of course but now it was much more precious because this child was born of love.

The grounds were unusually quiet. Usually, there was the sound of horses being ridden to and from the stables, or the sound of laughter as servants gossiped as they did their chores. But today, it was all quiet and just a sultry awareness hovered over her. The pale yellow and red streaks had dissipated in the sky but the hint of blue that foretold of a nice day had also vanished, leaving behind moody streaks that hung ominously overhead. The wind was shrill, and she wrapped her cloak around her shoulders. She had time for a walk, feeling the need to get out of the castle grounds. With its foreboding turrets and grey stone, it had a menacing feel and she was beginning to find it oppressive. That might be due to Hiram's nightmare, where it had unsettled her, but she felt the need for the fresh air to whip away her fears and to relish in the beauty of this untamed landscape.

As Heather hurried to the outer walls, which were flanked by stone, she was less buffeted by the winds that swept across the moors. Her aim had been to walk around the grounds towards one of the boundary walls and then back. The chill breeze caught in her throat and whipped her voice away, and all the while, it reached beneath the inadequate clothes, making her shiver, although she welcomed the bracing conditions. With head down, she strode on determinedly. This was what she needed—to move, to stretch her legs, to increase her heart rate. She had to look after herself, keep her body strong. She also needed to connect to this land, to make it her own. She was the Laird's wife and needed to know every nook and cranny and to feel a deep, abiding passion for the place. As of yet, it was not hers. She still felt an intruder here.

She picked up the pace, leaving the castle behind and heading for the outer perimeter, the storm clouds rolling endlessly overhead. A

glimpse of sunlight, which was quickly quelled by the foreboding clouds, and the wind buffeted her clothes and she held on desperately to her cloak. Dark, sinister clouds circled above, their presence tying into Hiram's premonition. It wasn't real, but she was still affected by this obvious inner fear. She wondered if these fears were genuine in that he refused to give into them when he was awake but at night, they tormented him. Shaking her mind free from the thoughts, she cast a glance back up at the angry sky. The clouds threatened to release their cargo, but still she continued, fighting stubbornly against the elements, teetering on the edge of the old moat, partially filled in. It was too far from the castle surely to have been the moat and she wondered if originally the castle had been further over.

From the gloom, she caught sight of a horse galloping across the fields, both rider and horse in perfect unison, matching movements. For a second, her heart skipped a beat. Hiram? She was about to wave but as the horse galloped closer she saw that it was not her husband, but Connor. Heather gasped, fear settling into the pit of her stomach. She took a step back and turned away, walking back towards the castle walls, the wind whipping at her clothes, making it difficult to walk. The skies opened and rain poured down in torrents as the clouds released their yield and within seconds, she was drenched to the skin.

"My Lady." Connor was by her side. "This is not a day for a walk. Let me take you back." He turned her until she was facing him. "You can't stay out in this." He reached out a hand to pull her up on the horse, but she refused.

"I will walk. Thank you."

His eyes were dark pools of malice, she realized. She wanted to be anywhere but here. He dismounted and moved towards her. His intent was clear. He pulled her frame to him all while the rain poured down around them. Heather struggled against him, but he held her firm and he assessed her as the rain molded clothes to her willowy frame, and she saw the light of passion ignite.

"No, Connor."

She struggled but he gripped tighter.

“One kiss. That’s all I ask. To taste your lips, to feel your tongue...”

“Stop!” She struggled against him, feeling his hard frame against the softness of her breasts and her stomach against his. “Don’t...please.” She was begging him now and tried to move her hips away from him, but he clutched her tightly.

“How many times have I thought of this? Your scent, your lips.” He breathed in her essence. “You smell like vanilla.” He groaned in his throat. All his passion of the moment evident. He kissed her lips lightly, holding her head still. Then forcibly, slid his tongue inside her mouth. In a second, he had pulled her hips towards him hard and she gasped, wrenching her head away.

“I wish you were mine, Heather. I would make you mine in an instant.”

“I am married to your brother!” she protested.

“You know if I take you now he won’t want you again? We’ve discussed it. Soiled goods, he said. He wouldn’t want anything I have touched. So, maybe I will start with these.” He released one hip to touch her breasts, running his fingers across them, then squeezed hard. “Finally, I get to feel what all the fuss is about!” He laughed eerily as the rain soaked them both and he lowered his head to kiss her skin. She struggled but he was strong, his fingers like a vice, and she felt his hardness against her. His passion very clear.

“Struggle for me. I bet you want it rough,” he commanded.

She gasped. “Of course I will struggle but not in passion. Connor you are sick!” She tried to wriggle free from him, but he clamped his arms around her so that she was pinned against his groin.

“Can you feel me? I will make it so good for you. Just give into this Heather, it is going to happen.” He nibbled her neck, drinking in her scent.

“And if I don’t?” She turned her head away from him.

“It won’t be good...for you at least, but it will happen.”

He pulled at her top as the wind grabbed at her shawl, sending it up

into the air where it fluttered about. He had torn the delicate fabric, revealing her cleavage, and he sighed in appreciation. "Beautiful. Quite beautiful." He licked his lips at the prospect.

Heather tried to run but he caught her in an instant and, turning her to face him, grinned at her. "I like a chase my dear, but I have been patient and it is about time you were mine. Time for me to taste you. He bent his head and licked the semi-exposed breasts and groaned. Impatient, he pulled her at her top so he could bury his head in them.

"Nooooooo!" she cried, but the wind whipped away her voice. She was alone with this mad man and no one was around to save her.

He lowered his hand, trying to peel away the layers of clothes so he could explore her depths. She struggled but the more she did so, the more he hurt her.

"Please, please don't do this...you can't...you are hurting me and...I can't be touched now...Connor...please." Heather was crying as he nipped at her breast and squeezed it hard.

"Tell me why I shouldn't take you right here and have you cry out my name? I am better in bed than him. Did you know that I took many of his ex-girlfriends? They all told me that I was the one they had wanted. Not boring Hiram."

"You forced them, you mean," she said accusingly, trying to hide her breasts

"They loved it. Like you will. Oh, Heather you will never want that idiot brother of mine again. Not after this. I will make it good for you at first, but then, cross me and I may have to punish you a little...or a lot." He laughed.

"Connor, please don't touch me! Please. You can't!"

"Tell me why," he demanded, his teeth gritted together, his jaw clenched. She saw his eyes darken with rage.

"Because...because...I am pregnant!" Heather cried out.

He stopped. The look of disgust was hard to miss. He looked her up and down, still holding her firmly. He knew she was telling the truth

as her hands came over the slight swell to her abdomen protectively. Then, instinctively and with anger, he pushed her away from him with some force. She stumbled back, slipping on the wet grass. She couldn't stop the movement, her balance was completely gone, and she caught her foot on trailing weeds and tangled, falling backwards, rolling down into the moat where she lay still.

The sky crackled in fury above, lightening ripping through the clouds with rain cascading down like sheets of water flooding the already sodden ground. Connor hauled himself back up on his stallion, his figure foreboding, haughty, and arrogant. He cast a backward glance at Heather as rain soaking into the ground around her created a rising puddle. She lay completely still, unaware of the water pooling up around her face and that icy temperatures were clawing at her skin.

For a moment, Connor almost silhouetted against the backdrop, watched as rain danced upon her skin and her clothes billowed in the breeze. Left out here for a few hours, and he knew it would not take long for her to succumb to the cold. Or, she could drown. The dip she had fallen into regularly flooded and he liked the idea of her drowning there. Soon, she would be out of his life and even better, Hiram would be grief-stricken. He might never recover from the loss of his wife and baby.

"Goodbye bitch," he said, and turned his horse around, galloping back to the stables and safety.

“Where’s Heather?” Hiram walked into the lounge. His large frame took up the doorway and water ran through his hair, dripping down the back of his neck. He looked at Connor and his mother, who were having afternoon tea, sitting by a raging fire that made shadows dance around the room.

“Isn’t she in her room dear?” His mother barely glanced at him. They were playing chess and her focus was on the antique pieces in front of her.

“You look soaked, Hiram. Best go and get dry. You’ll catch your death like that.” Connor pointed to the puddle of water disappearing into the carpet.

“She’s not in our room. Someone must have seen her?” he demanded.

“Did you check if she had taken a horse out? Maybe she went to join you but took shelter from the storm?” His mother moved the knight triumphantly and gazed at Connor, warmth emanating from her eyes.

“Yes, I think she was near to the stables. That was hours ago though. Maybe she went riding or waited the storm out there.”

“She wouldn’t.” Hiram gritted his teeth. This was going nowhere. He was worried. He felt rising anguish and left them to it; they were obviously not interested. He ran from room to room calling for her. Frustrated, he asked the servants, but no one had seen her.

“If Connor has touched her, I will kill him,” he kept repeating to himself.

Hiram had never felt fear like it. The pain of losing her crept into his being and ripped away at his core. What would he do if she had gone?

What if she had fallen, or if that bastard had hurt her?

Hiram went back outside. He tried the stables, but all the horses were there. There was no sign of the stable lads, but he checked each stall in case. He'd searched the castle from top to bottom, even checking with his sister, but no one had seen her at all. She had to be out in the grounds. For the first time in his life, he wished their grounds were less expansive, as she could have been taken ill and not able to move. What if she had lost the baby? Fear clutched his heart and he pushed himself on. He had to find her. He headed to the little maze; she spent a lot of time there. It was a cleverly designed route with twists and turns and secret little places in which to sit. He ran around each section calling her name. Nothing. Despair invaded his senses. She had gone. There was nowhere else.

Surely she wouldn't have tried to cross the moors on a day like this. The rain had started falling again. There'd been a brief respite, but now large puddles joined dot to dot across the landscaped sections. It would be much worse in the area outside of the grounds, he knew. It often flooded the moat as water unable to seep into the ground at the top would run down into the moat and it would pool, and in the past had become deeply filled. There'd been times it had flowed like a river. But she wouldn't go there.

Even so, he had to check, running through the gateway and edging along the rain-soaked ledge, searching in desperation. His voice was whipped away by the chill breeze and already, the evening was drawing in, the temperature dropping substantially. As he scanned the area, his heart sank; it was impossible for her to vanish. Misery held him tight. There was no sign of her. He couldn't lose her, he couldn't! He continued walking, desperation driving him forward. In the distance he saw a dark shape clutched by a gorse bush and as he ran towards it, he recognized it as Heather's shawl. So, she had been out this way. He searched the expanse of moors and then headed to the deep drop of the moat. Then, he saw her. Lying in water, her head almost under, but in the deepest part of the moat her torso had already disappeared. He ran, sliding down the bank, churning up mud and running through the rising pool of water until he was at her side.

He lifted her head gently. She was unconscious, or dead? He felt her

skin. She was cold to the bone. He was shaking so much that he couldn't even feel for a pulse. Her head dropped back, exposing her soft white throat and he could see her top had been ripped. In an instant, he noted fresh new bruises on her delicate skin and swallowed hard, fearful as to what had happened. He picked her up and she lay heavy in his arms, water dripping from her clothes, running along the bottom of the moat until he made it to a more gradual slope which took him up the side and back to the flat ground easily. She wasn't moving at all. Tears mingled with raindrops and he felt his heart hammering in his chest. His precious wife and baby. He couldn't lose them. Running, he carried her into the castle and up to their room, calling for the servants to get the doctor.

"Hurry! " he shouted, as they stood wide-eyed at the vision of her lifeless in his arms.

As he lay her on the bed, wrapping her in all the blankets, he saw her eyes flicker, her face pale. He kissed her forehead.

"Heather, come back to me. Heather, can you hear me?"

Slowly, as warmth spread through her body, she felt life coming back to her, but couldn't move. Her energy had drained away and she began to shiver profusely, unable to ascertain at first what had happened. As the doctor finally entered the room, Hiram stepped back to let him see to her. He stumbled out of the room, slid down the wall and sat on the corridor floor outside, and began to sob quietly.



She was able to sit up now. Energy had returned to her limbs and the servants had helped her to change out of wet clothes and she was now wrapped in warm robes and tucked up in bed. Her hair, still slightly damp, hung in waves around her shoulders. She looked and felt haunted though. She couldn't quite remember what had happened. It was just on the peripheral of her memory, something bad, ominous, lurking in the wings of her mind. She sipped hot soup and the warmth flooded through her. She was so, so tired. Exhaustion tugged at her consciousness and every now and then, she could feel herself tuning out and slipping away.

Hiram hovered constantly. She knew inside he was worried and wanted to help her but she couldn't seem to voice the words or the feelings. So, instead, she focused on the soup followed by a warming drink of milk. As the time passed, she grew too hot, too confined under the blankets and robes. Hiram climbed into bed, having stoked the fire first so that it cast a rosy glow around their quarters. Her strength returning, she slipped from the bed and took her warm robe off. She gestured him to let her be. She felt too warm now and took her thin gown off too, standing naked in front of him, no longer embarrassed. As she turned to face him, he gasped and scrambled out of bed, turning her, seeing for the first time the angry bruises. She looked down, slightly bewildered by the look on his face and then, in that second, seeing the bruises, it all fell into place. Connor's attempt to touch her, to rape her...she had almost become another of his victims. Heather shivered uncontrollably, her teeth chattering as those terrible moments came back to haunt her. She remembered it all. It was the pregnancy that had saved her.

"He stopped because I told him about the baby," she recalled.

"Connor did this?" Hiram felt anger surge within him. Hot angry tears filled his eyes and he could barely see, for the emotion was choking him. "He knows?"

"Yes."

She shivered and he pulled her to him.

"It was the only way he would leave me alone. But, oh Hiram, the look on his face, the anger, the revulsion...he pushed me. He really pushed me hard, like I was dirty, like he hated me. I fell at the top of the moat and rolled down."

"He was there when you fell?" Hiram sucked in his breath. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He didn't want to hear her words and yet, he had to.

"Yes, I shrieked and as I fell back, I saw him looking at me like I was nothing."

"He left you to die! He knows that moat still gets flooded. If I had gotten to you a few minutes later than I did, the water would have

been over your head.” Hiram shook his head in disbelief. “He left you on purpose.” Rage bubbled up within him and Hiram clenched his fists. “I am going to kill him for this.”

“Please wait. Don’t leave me. I don’t want you to do anything right now. Let’s deal with it tomorrow. All I want is for you to hold me tonight. Please, Hiram.”

He nodded, biting down on his anger. It was enough to know that Conner had tried to touch her, and Hiram felt sick to the core just thinking about that. But, more than that, if Conner couldn’t have her, he had been prepared to drown Heather, killing both her and the unborn baby. Tears welled up in his eyes. He’d been so close to losing her, to losing them both. He would do as she asked tonight and somehow refrain from leaving her. However, in the morning, he would deal with Connor once and for all.

“*I*t is time he left.” Hiram was firm in his intent. He stared at his mother, daring her to argue. He’d never felt anything so keenly.

She looked shocked, then turned her full attention on him. “My dear boy, you can’t send your brother away. He has not been back for long. If he has upset you, I am sure he will apologize.” She smiled and began to file her long nails. “You see, Hiram, you have never really seen Connor the way I see him. You are his twin brother and so I don’t know why you cannot love him. Inside is a little boy, it is true, and he can be childish and irritating, but then I glimpse that inner child, the one who used to be so loving.”

Hiram breathed in deeply, trying to diffuse his rising anger. He felt his fists clench. She was right. He didn’t see Connor the way she did and that was a good thing. For many years, he’d lived in his shadow and had tried to be more like him but now, that thought made him shudder. Everyone had tried to protect or cover for Connor, but the reality was that it hadn’t worked. Connor was evil through and through. His mother’s opinion no longer mattered. He had to look after Heather and his unborn baby now. They were his family. He felt a sharp sense of loss, knowing that his father would have been on his side. He realized now how hard he had worked to try to hold this dysfunctional family together. But it was ripping apart at the seams. Hiram no longer felt hurt by his mother’s words or actions and he had no intention of trying to hold this family together. He loved his sister and she could stay but as for his mother and Connor, the best place for them would be far away.

“He tried to murder Heather.”

The words were out before he could bite them back. His voice

sounded strange. It was as if his throat was closing in on him. The memory of Heather lying in the moat close to death just the day before was vividly imprinted on his mind. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw that image, as if watching the life ebb from her. He felt such anger and hatred for his brother.

“Oh nonsense.” She laughed at first, “Hiram have you been drinking?”

Hiram glared at her, willing her to for once see the truth.

“No, you don’t really mean this.” She shook her head, trying to refute his words.

“He attacked her, tried to rape her, and when he found out she was already pregnant with my child, he assaulted her and left her to drown. While you were both in here playing your stupid games yesterday, I was frantically searching for my wife. I found her with only minutes to spare. She nearly died!” He choked on the words, hot angry tears clouding his vision.

She looked shocked, her face pale. “She’s pregnant?”

“Did you know he wanted Heather?” he demanded.

“Well, I...I...no, not in so many words. He...liked her...I mean...he was drawn to her...I think he felt that as the oldest...”

“By minutes.” Hiram seethed.

“Well, yes, but I suppose we should have married Heather to him really, but your father was against it and Connor was away, and we needed a marriage quickly.” She returned to her nails, concentrating on the sharpened red nail, until Hiram took it from her hands and threw it across the room.

“Why was he away Mother? Do you even remember what your son did? Do you remember what *you* did?”

She gazed up at him in confusion, blinking hard as if completely unaware.

“He raped that girl. Do you remember? You covered it up. Your precious little boy took what he wanted and then, discarded her. The same pattern throughout his life. But you, well, you couldn’t allow

anyone to sully that precious little boy's name could you? Because of your words, she killed herself." Hiram bent over his mother. He had never felt so coldly angry and forced her to answer him.

She gasped as the memories came flooding back. "She was guilty. She tried to seduce him."

"She was the victim, Mother! Both you and Connor killed her. You took a life! I can't do anything about her, but I can stop Connor now and I will. He either leaves, or I swear to God, I will kill him."

"No, don't touch my boy. He didn't mean to hurt her and...if he hurt Heather, she must have been leading him on. I've seen her Hiram; she is a bad match for you. She wants Connor, not you. They all wanted Connor didn't they?"

Hiram straightened himself to his full height and felt an icy chill invade him. There was nothing he could do for either of them, but he wanted them gone.

"Connor leaves today. It is up to you whether you go with him."

"Where am I going?" Connor's voice was quiet but there was an edge to it. He leaned against the doorway, hands in his pockets, smirking at Hiram.

Hiram glared at him. "Anywhere but here. You can take mother with you too." He squared up to his brother. "You are not welcome here anymore Connor. You tried to kill Heather yesterday! You are so sick and twisted inside and you don't want me to have someone who loves me. You feel she should have been given to you but thank God she was not. You would have tormented her, abused her, and raped her, just like you did that other girl."

"Just the one girl?" Connor laughed. "Oh brother, you don't know the half of it."

"What are you talking about?" Hiram felt his heart constrict in his chest.

"Well, there was the girl here who went missing...you remember, that one you fancied, just as we were leaving school? They found her eventually didn't they? All cold and very dead on the moors. It

appeared she had been attacked. But who would do that? Then there was the maid that you rescued. I let that one live...I wondered how she would carry on with such torment, it was all a little game. Then there was that other girl, the stupid one who committed suicide, well, dear Mother helped with that one...and then, in England, I had to shut another one up. Oh, her voice, went on and on and on. She loved me you see. Loved me so much. Sickening, really.”

Revulsion spread across his usually charming features. Now he looked ugly and Hiram realized that this was the real Connor. Now that he had started talking, he couldn't stop.

“She wanted marriage. She wanted a family. But she was so dull. That would have been a life of dullness and boredom. I had to...get rid of her. But that meant I had to get away from England for a while. Just until the coast was clear.” Connor laughed. “Come on little brother, don't look like that. It was fun.”

“And Heather?”

“She should have been mine. I wanted her. I tried to fight it, but I couldn't. She should have been given to me. It was my right.” He raised his voice. Lips curled and spittle emanated from his mouth. His dark eyes flashed his anger.

“You will never have her. She is my wife.” Hiram's voice was threatening and cold.

“I could have taken her yesterday but in the end I threw her away!” Connor sneered contemptuously. “Like a plaything.”

“Why? Why did you try to hurt her?”

“She is carrying your brat.” Connor sneered. “She sickened me the moment she began to plead with me and told me about that thing growing inside of her.”

Hiram aimed directly at Connor's jaw. His fist connected with bone, snapping Connor's head back and he staggered, caught off balance, eventually landing against the corner chair. He rubbed at his jaw, the skin already reddening, and began to laugh.

“The winner takes it all, eh Hiram? Heather is the prize.” He quickly

stood up and continued to mock. "If I win, I take Heather as my own and there will be nothing you can do about it." He sneered.

"She will never be yours. This is not a stupid game. This is my life. It is her life and our child. She will never belong to you," he spat. Every fiber of his being rippled with fury and intent. Every muscle tensed ready to defend his wife and himself and in that moment, there was no way he could lose. He wanted to kill Connor and end this madness.

"Please Hiram, don't hurt my boy! He doesn't mean it!" Her voice was frenzied.

"Get out Mother or bear witness to your little boy's death."

The two men circled each other, their animosity growing as they eyed each other up.

"I will never sit on the sidelines while you have what should be mine," Connor said with cruelty in his voice.

"That's it isn't it? Jealousy and greed. You want what I have. If Patrick had lived, you would have done the same to him." Hiram shook his head in disbelief.

"That sniveling little brat," Connor jeered at him. "Think yourself lucky, Hiram, that you were less easy to get rid of. I did think about it."

"Connor, no! Not Patrick?" His mother gasped in horror, tears welling up in her eyes. "Why?"

"I wanted you to myself Mother, I was not going to share your affection," Connor admitted.

"Then, why not try to kill me?" Hiram was confused.

"Because SHE did not love you!" Connor pointed a finger at their mother, who blanched at the accusation.

Hiram knew he was telling the truth. His mother's inability to love him had probably saved him. He closed his eyes, feeling the loss of his younger brother Patrick, now knowing the true reality of that tragedy. Anger rose up again. It was time.

“Hiram.” Heather’s voice broke into his concentration. “What he did was wrong, and he must be punished, but don’t do this. Don’t stoop to his level, please.”

He turned to look at her coldly. “Go back to our room. I don’t want you here for this.”

He could see the tears in her eyes and her raw pain, but he was the Laird, and this had to be done.

“Stay, Heather. You are the prize. You need to be here to congratulate the winner.” Connor laughed maniacally. “The winner takes it all!” He gestured to the castle and land and then pointed to Heather. “Or you could go and wait in your room for me to arrive.” He blew her a kiss.

Hiram threw himself at Connor; his weight took Connor off his feet and they rolled together over the sturdy sofa and onto the floor behind it. Hiram could feel blood coursing through his veins; it felt as if a river of energy fueled every cell in his body, feeding oxygen directly to his muscles. He felt invincible. Sitting on top of Connor, he reined angry blows onto his face, intent on wiping the smile off his face. He felt charged with emotion—it consumed him. There was no love between them anymore. Connor was a monster, he couldn’t be trusted, and Hiram knew that if he didn’t stop him, it would only be a matter of time before he attacked Heather again.

He stopped hitting him and placed his large hands around his throat and squeezed. Connor squirmed underneath his invading fingers and began to choke.

“You have one final chance Connor. I will kill you now or you can get up and get out of here and never come back.” Hiram squeezed tighter and Connor coughed and gurgled again, his eyes bulging.

“Hiram please!” This time, his mother’s frantic voice broke into the moment. “Give him a chance. He is sorry.”

Hiram squeezed tighter. He didn’t want to let him go. He didn’t want to give Connor another chance. Time seemed to stand still. Connor’s eyes were wide and bulging. He coughed again as Hiram’s fingers tightened around his throat. Connor’s hand slapped against the floor. He gasped as the last of the air was squeezed out of his lungs.

“Hiram!” His mother wailed.

Finally, sense returned to his angered state and he released his fingers, moving back as if in slow motion while Connor rolled onto his knees and coughed, gasping for air.

“You could have killed him!” His mother’s eyes filled with tears as she looked at her favored son kneeling on the ground and struggling to breathe.

“That was my intention,” he said, his eyes dark and steely. “Even though he has admitted to killing Patrick, you still defend him. What is wrong with you? Know this, he goes today. If you want to join him, be my guest.”

Heather stood in the doorway. Her green eyes filled with tears and her red hair tumbled over her shoulders in waves. Her hands clasped over her mouth as she fought against nausea rising within her. Hiram’s expression softened when he saw the marks on her pale skin where Connor had clutched her to try to control her the day before. *No one will ever hurt her again*, he vowed. *No one*. The noise behind him faded to a blur. He knew his mother was crying and bending over Connor as if tending to the little boy she imagined him to be. All he could see were the shiny depths of her emerald eyes drawing him towards his wife. She was like a magnet to him and he felt his heart beating erratically beneath his ribs. As she stood silently, her hands dropped away to her sides and he focused on her full lips and the intensity of her gaze.

“Hiram.” He saw her expression change before he heard the anguish of her words. He felt the blow against the side of his head and as he crumbled to his knees. He fell onto broken glass, disorientated, the room spinning. Fighting down nausea, he tried to stand up but was dizzy, and clutched the wall unit for support. Blood trickled down the side of his face and he wiped it away. He’d been stupid to turn his back on Connor.

“You shouldn’t have let me go brother.” Connor had lost all control. He waved a large blade at Hiram and it glinted menacingly in the artificial light.

“Don’t be stupid,” Hiram told him. “Just pack up your things and get out. Don’t come back. This is your final chance.”

“I don’t want another chance. I’d rather die than have you get everything.” Madness raged through every part of him. Hiram could see that the brother he had once known had gone. Now all that was left was this deadly threat to all he loved.

Connor charged at him, the blade coming dangerously close to his chest, but Hiram somehow managed to deflect it, turning his body to the side so that the blade merely grazed him. It was sharp and cut through his T-shirt with ease, the momentum sending Connor sprawling and the blade hitting the floor. Hiram kicked it away and punched Connor with everything he had, transmuting all energy through that single punch. The shock rippled through his arm and he knew that the force of it must have hurt him, but he was fueled by madness and knew that nothing would stop him. He didn’t experience fear and that alone made him dangerous. Hiram went to pick up the blade; he couldn’t let Connor have it.

“Hiram!” Heather shrieked.

As he spun round Connor launched another attack, charging at him and without realizing, had impaled himself on the blade of which Hiram had in front of him. Hiram gasped as he realized the blade had plunged deep into Connor’s stomach and was now embedded within. Blood spurted out from the wound and Connor opened his eyes wide with shock. He couldn’t straighten up and held onto the knife as if in disbelief that it had happened. He grunted and pulled the knife out. Hiram took a step back instinctively, but it clattered to the floor and Connor fell with it, rolling onto his back.

“Get help!” He shouted to his mother, but she was rooted to the ground. Her eyes were fixed on Connor, watching as blood pumped out of his body and soaked into the floor. Hiram watched without emotion as his lifeblood drained away. He knew there would come a time when he felt the pain of this moment, but there was only relief. He hadn’t planned to use the blade, he hadn’t wanted to kill his brother this way, but he had wanted to end the madness. This had brought the fight to a close. Hiram knew Connor should not have

removed the blade, but he also knew that Connor had done this on purpose.

He was only vaguely aware that Heather had taken his mother from the room and a stillness settled across the bloody scene. He should say something prosaic, something to let Connor know he was forgiven, but he couldn't. Anger still resided within him and he would never forgive his brother for trying to kill Heather. She was his life. Connor was the brother who was unpredictable, moody, and manipulative. Now, as his brother gurgled in his final moments, Hiram felt free.

He waited until Connor had taken his last breath and then sighed, feeling exhausted mentally and physically. He should have tried to save him, but deep within, he knew there was relief for them both. Connor was mad, had been mad, there was an insanity that lurked within the family. But it was over. It would take time to come to terms with this but they would do it somehow and move on. There was just the problem of their mother to deal with now. She would be devastated, he knew. Hiram bent down to close his brother's eyes and walked away, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Days passed. Hiram busied himself keeping the castle and land in shape. It was important now more than ever to ensure all was working as it should be, and he had to stamp his authority on the place. It was just him managing it all and he was kept busy from early morning to night. But he knew he was also distracting himself from what had happened. However, there was a more pressing problem. Somehow, he had to make the castle resilient again. They dare not show weakness. With his father and Connor gone, they were vulnerable to attack. He had to get their army in place. That was vital for their survival. He needed at least fifty good men from across the land, but they needed more. Somehow, he had to consider making a match for his sister, but he could only imagine that not going down well. She was pretty enough but a bit of a tomboy. She had never shown signs of wanting to marry. He didn't even know if she had even dated.

As he gazed over the land, his eyes scanning the horizon, he drank in the vibrant green and purple shades. There was nothing like Scotland, he mused, and no one would ever convince him otherwise. This place, it was as if it ran through his veins. He belonged here and would never leave. The sky was moody and foreboding today. Dark clouds hovered with menace over the rolling hills as if in defiance of the sun that cast a subdued glow across the surrounding peaks. The weather had been unpredictable ever since Connor had died. Hiram had caught the servants whispering in the corners about how the tragedy had set off a sinister sequence of impending doom. One of them had sworn she had seen the apparition of Connor roaming the moors trying to get into the grounds. Hiram had glared at them and had the satisfaction of seeing them run back to the kitchens.

There would have been more heartbreak and doom had Connor lived. It was the best result. If he had lived, some poor woman would have received the brunt of his wrath. If Hiram had stayed, he could be mourning his own wife and child-to-be at this moment. He closed his eyes, feeling a chill run through him at that thought. He couldn't lose them; they were his life now. They were everything. Connor had been a blot on the landscape, he'd been a plague within the family. The son who had never grown up, but had been a child inside, never having broken that tether to their mother. Hiram sighed. He felt as if he was trying to justify his actions and in some ways he was, but there was a relief that lifted his mood more often than not. The last thing he needed were stupid servants whispering about ghost stories.

A movement to his left caught his attention and he saw Heather entering the garden area. He knew how she loved to sit in there and to relax. It was so important for her now. She was looking radiant, albeit it a little tired, but her formerly flat stomach was now rounded. It wasn't too obvious to others yet, but when he watched her undress at night, peeling off each layer, he would catch his breath at her stomach knowing how inside that protective layer, their baby was growing. He'd experienced a myriad of emotions: love, protectiveness, and a surge of passion for wanting her so much, though being afraid he might hurt the baby. Heather had simply smiled and had opened up to him, wrapping her long legs around him and encouraging his movements.

"Just gently," she had whispered to him.

He'd obeyed, his movements soft and gentle but matching the rhythm of her hips and loving every moment of this union. It was even more intense, more loving than he could have imagined. He'd looked into her sparkling green eyes and saw his own love reflected back at him. Their climax had been incredible, and they had lain together trembling while he had stroked the slight swell of her tummy, marveling that they had created life together.

At least they were safe, providing he could muster enough men for an army or forge a new alliance if Maggie would agree to marriage. He wondered how to broach the subject. Brow furrowed, he turned his attention back to the land. This was a labor of love. While he hadn't

expected this responsibility so soon, he cherished the opportunity to steer this castle and family to greatness.

The clouds scurried above him and then, as if on cue, the skies opened. Hiram ran towards the castle entrance, hearing thunder rip across the sky and lightning flashing its presence to all. The dark skies claimed the land again, albeit briefly, as he took off his boots in the entrance and marveled at the suddenness of the storms here. The trees that surrounded the grounds like silent sentries bent at the mercy of the winds that whipped across the moors, the large open expanse of land which always chilled visitors to the castle, unprepared for the playground of the elements where the ground lay sodden for weeks after rainfall and mist, and a bitter breeze battered them above ground. There was stark beauty here. The sky dark and brooding in its intensity showered torrents of rain down onto ground still soaked from the drenching only days before. Low clouds passed by discarding their load before the wind whisked them away. Startled birds flew to cover, frantically battling winds. He noticed the hooded crows being swept along croaking furiously before landing safely in the castle turrets. *Survivors*, he thought, smiling wryly. *Battling the odds and still coming through. That's us. That's what we must do.*

In the large sitting room, the fire roared its approval at him. He felt the warmth hit him and sighed in relief, stripping off his coat already covered in droplets from the rain. Heather was sitting by the fire warming her hands.

"You got caught out in the rain too." He laughed at her red hair, wispy tangles, glowing even redder with the light from the fire.

She put her hand up to her shimmering locks and patted them in place but failed. They hung damply around her face. "Yes, the storm came on so suddenly. I was about to read and then got a drenching for my efforts." She laughed.

Hiram stretched his long frame out in the armchair opposite her. It felt so good to relax, just the two of them, but the shadow of what to do about his mother hung over him like the damp clouds outside.

"Have you seen her?" He raised his worried eyes to Heather's, but she shook her head.

"I knocked on her door earlier and asked if she was okay. There was no answer."

"She needs time," Hiram said, contemplating how long he should give her.

"Am I wrong to feel relieved?" Heather turned worried eyes to him. "He would have raped me, and he left me to die. I can't forget that or forgive him, ever." She swallowed hard, fighting back her tears. "I still think about that moment. He was a vile man, Hiram. I am so glad you are my husband. What would have become of me if they had married me to him?"

A chill settled over Hiram again. It felt as if a passing shadow had reached out to touch him, but he shrugged the feeling away.

"I would have fallen in love with you and took you away from him. I would have killed..." The word hung in the air and their eyes met in unique understanding. They were meant to be together and nothing, not even family, could keep them apart.

"We have to think about our future. Forget about him. We do what we must so to be together and to look after our child. The future Laird."

"Or Lady," Heather chided, wagging a finger in his direction. "Will you mind if we have a daughter?"

"Not at all, not if she is as beautiful as you. Ah, think of it, my own wee lassie." Hiram smiled. "I don't care if we have ten girls."

"Ten?" Heather shrieked out loud. "You want ten children? I am not sure I can oblige my Lord."

Hiram grinned. "It is your wifely duty to provide to me. So, when I come back from monitoring the land, I expect you to be waiting submissively for me."

"Submissively?" She giggled. "Do you know me?"

Hiram leaned forward, his face flushed by the roaring fire nearby. "No not yet, but I would like to." He grinned and his eyes sparkled mischievously. "I will allow you a short period of time after giving birth and then, as soon as you are able to, I will be back inside you. I

plan to make you pregnant quickly.”

“Hiram.” She blushed. “Someone might hear you.” Heather looked around nervously.

“I think we should practice right now.” He jumped from his chair and straddled her, pushing her back in her seat. She struggled beneath him, still giggling as he pulled at her top until one rosy nipple was displayed to him. “I will start here.” He took the nipple into his mouth, gently teasing her, and she groaned instantly with desire sweeping over her. When he released it and tucked it back in place, she looked at him in disappointment, her desire evident.

“You have a ten second start Milady, but wherever I catch you, that is where I will take you. And I mean that. Go!” He pulled her to her feet and started counting.

Laughing, she ran straight for the stairs, shrieking as she did so, hearing her husband running behind her. She had just made it to their bedroom when he caught her and whisked her up in his arms, kicking the door open and throwing her onto the bed. She bounced twice before he pinned her down.

“Now, it is time to make you mine.”

“Don’t cry my love.” Hiram pulled her into his arms tightly, holding her as close as he could. “Shh, I think it bothers you more than you let on. You have to talk to me,” Hiram said.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Please, let it go, it will fade.” She shuddered, praying that the scene within her mind would fade. She felt haunted. It was as if the foundations of her very being were becoming tremulous. Ever since Connor’s assault, it had brought back painful memories. Now in her dreams, it was Connor at first who taunted her, but then his face would disappear, fading until the faces of the other men who had tried to rape her materialized. She felt the same rising sense of panic as when Connor had looked at her that day. Malicious intent had been written in his eyes.

She had never shared this story with anyone. She wanted to talk to Hiram—he was her husband and they shouldn’t have secrets—but she was terrified he would stop loving her. But there was more to it than this. She was concerned that once out in the open, the past would continue to haunt her.

Hiram put his finger under her chin so she was looking at him. “I heard your dream. That is not something that will simply fade away. I want to kill them, all of them that were there.” Hiram growled in his throat. Pure anger resonated within him. He was serious.

She gasped. “You know?” Her eyes filled with tears and she pulled away, shame rippling through her.

“You lived through it all in your sleep. At first, I thought it was Connor,” he admitted. “It was hard to hear but I realized that something had changed and there was more that you had been bottling up.” He stroked her hair tenderly. “You have to let me help

you through this.”

“Will it solve anything? It won’t change the past.” Tears fell down her face. “I thought I had moved past it. I had buried it. I can’t tell my story after all this time. No one would ever believe they hurt me. They will say that I am making it up,” Heather said.

Hiram fought down his rising anger. “I will punish those who wronged you my love. Make no mistake—they will not be able to hurt anyone else.”

“I know they deserve it, but maybe I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps they realized how awful they had been and never touched another woman like that. Not everyone is like Connor. Your perception is tainted because of your brother. Most parents would have taught their children right from wrong, but your mother was deluded. She thought Connor was so special when really he was evil. He even killed your other brother. Why didn’t your father get her help?” Heather asked.

“Hey, come on, I don’t know why he didn’t. Do you not think that even the memory of Connor sickens me? I can’t get it out of my head about Patrick and yet, mother still won’t hear a word against him. I believe my father was protecting her. Right or wrong, he did what he thought was best. I am only concerned about you my love. I want justice for you.”

“I just want to forget,” Heather said.

Hiram stood up and moved to the wardrobe. He pulled out his clothes neatly hanging up and laid them on the bed. “Get dressed,” he directed, and with a look of surprise, she did as she was told. His expression gave nothing away.

“What do I wear?”

“Something comfortable. We are getting out of this place for a few hours.”

Heart lifting, she slipped on a favorite dress that had a tight bodice but flowed around her. She tied her long red hair back in a ponytail.

“Where are we going?” Heather asked, following him down the stairs

and into the kitchen. She saw him peek inside. “No one is here yet,” he whispered, and crept over to the large walk-in larder. He grabbed a bag and filled it with drinks, apples, and some cake, and then they tiptoed back out.

“It’s your kitchen, why are you creeping about?” Heather giggled.

“It is more fun to steal.” He laughed at her expression. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

They sat in the carriage together and Heather watched the scenery stream past the window. The two horses pulling the carriage made light work of the trip passing by small cottages nestled against a backdrop of rolling hills, and she noticed meandering streams that ploughed their way through undulating banks. It was a relief to be away from the castle, she realized. Even though she had no regrets about Connor’s death, it still cast a shadow over them. It was as if the impression of him had never quite left, his spirit having seeped into the fabric of the house and into the solid stone walls. Even the landscape seemed to echo his voice and his evil intent. She wondered why evil outshone goodness.

Heather had found a family oil painting of Connor in one room. It was not a large one like the others but the artist had captured the malice in the boy’s eyes and wherever she walked in the room, it was as if his eyes had followed her. She had shivered at the prospect and had climbed onto a chair, taking the weight of the painting and its dusty frame from the wall, stacking it so that it faced the wall. When she had gone into the room next, the painting had disappeared. There was only the pale wall furnishings behind that depicted it had even been there. Heather wondered who had taken it.

“We are here.” Hiram helped her out of the door and she looked around. The scene was beautifully green, replenished by all the rains and unlike the day before, the sky was a cloudless blue and warmth spread through her as she stood under the sun’s gentle rays. Heather felt like a flower after the rain had drenched the landscape. She felt her heart and mind opening to the gentle warmth, like a flower bud revealing its petals layer by layer.

As she looked down the hillside, she saw the pool of water at the

bottom, beautifully clear and sparkling in the sunlight. It was mesmerizing.

"These are healing waters," he told her.

Heather smiled. "Really? Because you say so?"

"According to folklore actually." He laughed.

She already felt as if she was healing. Just being here with him away from the oppressive feeling of the castle was enough, but Heather knew she could bare anything providing Hiram was by her side. He was her best friend; he was her soul mate and her lover. She could not ask for more. Hiram helped her down the steep slope, her feet sliding on the soft, lush grass.

When they reached the bottom, she felt concealed from the outside world with steep slopes rising from all sides. It felt like a different world altogether with fresh-faced flowers invading the grasses and adding color all around. Yet, there was the house on the hill to worry about and even though it looked so tiny, she wondered how much they could see from their windows. She suddenly felt self-conscious as she started to peel away her layers of clothing.

"Do you think they can see us?" Heather asked nervously.

"Does it really matter?" Hiram teased her. His large hands reached for her shoulders, pulling her straps down her arms, revealing her ample cleavage. He parted the material, pulling softly on it so that it released her large breasts little by little.

"Hiram..." She was breathless, anticipating his touch.

She couldn't stop him. Didn't want to miss out on the sensations that were rippling through her. Just the thought of him revealing her body to the world in this way was exciting beyond belief. With eyes closed, she could feel his fingers gently tracing the curvature of her breasts; they were rising and falling with each breath. He traced the line from her collarbone into the cleavage and then all along the top, teasing her while watching her mischievously as she tilted her head back, lips parting, eyes closed. Her hair tumbled in dark red waves across the creamy exposed skin. He gazed as the breeze whisked the hair across

her breasts, and swallowed hard. Half-hidden, half-exposed, he felt the knot of desire tighten within him.

Encouraged by her obvious desire, Hiram bent his head to kiss the exposed skin, pulling back her garments so that from his vantage point, he could see her completely. Then, grinning, he pulled up her flowing skirt and reached beneath to pull the layers down.

Heather gasped, eyes still closed, obediently waiting, but secretly reveling in this display of wantonness. She knew they could be seen, if someone really wanted to, but there was a part of her that just didn't care. Garments discarded. He moved back up, leaving her with just a lacy bra with breasts spilling over and a petticoat, covering her nakedness.

"Your breasts are definitely growing." He sighed in appreciation and grinned at her. She was embarrassed but he knew she was loving the attention. "Come on." He ushered her into the water, the icy chill making her gasp again.

"Hiram, it's freezing."

Goosebumps appeared all down her arms and she shivered, but he grinned as he pulled her into the water with him until her petticoat flowed around her. His hands disappeared beneath the water, as he fumbled with his own clothes. She knew it would be only moments before he took her. His eyes never left hers as he pulled her to him. She felt his desire, pressing against her and then, in a deft movement, he lifted her and impaled her soft flesh onto him. She cried out loud and clung to him.

Hoisted in this way, soft breasts still partially covered, nestled against his face and with one arm still clasping her body to him, he held one breast, suckling the nipple. She arched her back with each expert flick of his tongue. He sent electric sensations throughout her body and she yielded willingly to his demands. Fighting the waves of desire flooded through her body, she ached for her release, desperately trying to hold on, wanting this moment to last forever. His movements were gentle but insistent and every time she shuddered with the undulating waves of joy rippling through her, he would stop for a moment, bringing her back down, a small respite against his pleasurable peaks. They kissed,

long and passionate, feeling every sensation, his breath warm against her. Incapable of movement, the waves of pleasure engulfed her.

It seemed impossible to feel this much for someone, to want them so badly that even after being satisfied fully, he only needed to look at her, raising one thick eyebrow in her direction, his eyes sparkling, and desire would build up within her again. He told she was insatiable, wanton, and she knew it was true, but only with him. She could refuse him nothing. She didn't care what he did if it was to her. She loved every second of it. Heather arched her back, leaning back slightly, legs wrapped around his hips, giving him full access to her body, her long red hair cascaded out into the water behind her head.

"I can't hold back," Hiram groaned and then, juddered within her. Knowing that he had lost control, Heather gave into the sheer pleasure of the moment, waves and waves of pleasure soaring through every part of her body. She pulled herself up into his arms and their tongues met, not with desire but with love and intimacy. He held her close and they embraced before he released her, and she leaned against him trying to draw energy back into her legs. He slowly covered her up and helped her out of the water.

"That was amazing," she admitted, as they went to retrieve their clothes.

"No, you are amazing." Hiram laughed. "Little did I imagine when we first met that I was going to have such a wanton woman on my hands."

"Complaining?" She looked at him with deep affection, green eyes sparkling.

"Not a chance." He laughed loudly. "I love it and I love you." He leaned forward and smoothed one hand over her long hair, and she curled against him, reveling in their continued intimacy. *She is all fire and ice*, he thought with deep contentment. He couldn't imagine life without her. He imagined her with two children, a boy and a girl, clasping her hands, both with deep auburn hair that glinted red in the sunlight, with the same green eyes that looked deep into the soul.

As he watched her continue to dress, her clothes wet and hugging her

form, he realized he wanted more than two children with her. He would continue to make her pregnant for as long as he could, and he knew that she would be willing. She was everything he could have imagined and more. Years of passion and love stretched ahead of them. He would never be bored of this woman—she was his life, his love, and his soulmate. And he knew, without any doubt at all, that she felt the same about him. Their connection was intensely physical, the chemistry between them beyond anything that he could ever have imagined, but there was respect and love, one so deep that he would give his life for her.

Hand in hand, they walked back up to the carriage which had been discreetly turned back to the way they had come so no one could see their antics. Blushing, Heather scrambled into the carriage while Hiram grinned at her, knowing that now, with passion satiated, that the reality of their actions was starting to sink in.

He sat by her side and held a hand. “I told you, those waters were healing.”

She giggled. “You did indeed my love. I am healed, inside and out.”

Leaning against him, Heather felt deep contentment as the carriage ambled back towards the castle. Nothing mattered but this moment. She didn’t want to return but she would go anywhere with him. Providing he was by her side, she could do anything.

“I want you to know that I never encouraged those other men that time, you know?” Her eyes were wide and honest.

“You didn’t have to encourage them.” Hiram looked at her sadly. “You just had to look beautiful and that was your only crime.”

She nodded, tears springing to her eyes, almost unable to speak. “I fought against them.”

“I will never forget the conversation I had with that girl, the one that Connor raped all those years ago.” Eyes sad, he looked at Heather, shaking his head. “Connor had threatened her and said that as he had been in trouble before, she had to blame me and that mother had agreed with this, knowing her precious son would be prosecuted if I was not the one blamed. Her logic was that I had never done anything

wrong so would get away with the accusation.” Hiram gazed ahead bleakly. “Even though she was terrified, she refused to blame me and in the end, Connor was sent away. Of course, he had a backup plan.

“He told her that it was her fault that he had succumbed to temptation because she had given him the signs. He said he had fought against it, but she had smiled at him in the wrong way and that she had touched him a little longer than was decent. It had been a sign that she was willing. You know, it almost worked on her, but I asked her one thing, whether she could in all honesty believe that was the truth, and deep down she knew she was not to blame because she had seen the madness in Connor’s eyes.”

“She must have felt dirty and abused,” Heather said sadly.

“Oh, she did, but I told her repeatedly that it was not her fault and that she had a duty to herself, to live a life that was full and happy. She deserved that. I can introduce you to her if you would like. She is safe and well, fortunately, not like the other women he raped and abused.”

“You think he attacked many others?”

“Honestly? I dread to think how many women he hurt in this way.”

A few days had passed and Hiram brought Bonnie to the castle. Heather had been waiting for her and she had drinks waiting for them both in the castle grounds, away from prying eyes. She only lived a few miles away and Hiram had sent the carriage over to her. She had been happy to come and make Heather’s acquaintance.

“Hello, my Lady, it is nice to finally meet you. I am sorry I did not meet you sooner. But, circumstances made it not possible,” she said with a bow.

Heather hugged the girl. “Let’s dispense with protocol.” She smiled at her. “How are you?”

Bonnie smiled. She was natural, fresh-faced, and instantly likeable. “I can never thank your husband enough. He saved my life. I was in the depths of despair, so afraid that Connor would kill me and whether he would have made me pregnant.”

Heather understood only too well. “It wasn’t your fault, he was, well, sick...there is no other way I can describe it.”

“He hurt you too?”

“I think he was going to rape me. He was so jealous of my love for Hiram and he thought because he was the eldest, even by a few minutes, that I should have been married to him.” Heather placed her hands on her face, trying to hide the look of revulsion that swept across her features, but she couldn’t contain the shiver that still ran through her at the thought. “I think I would have killed myself if I have been married to him, and that’s the truth. I can only feel such gratitude myself towards Hiram in that he was the one I had to marry. He also saved my life because Connor left me to die in the moat recently and in all those bad weather conditions, I really would have died.”

Bonnie reached out and held Heather’s hands and the two knew that they had created a friendship, connected through grief and trauma for the experiences shared.

“Is it wrong to be so glad that he is dead?” Bonnie asked.

“If it is, I share that feeling too and we are both wrong,” Heather admitted. “Sometimes I still feel him here. Like a ghost drifting across this land. In the darkness at night, I hear his voice whispering to me. I hope that these feelings will fade in time.”

“Haunted,” Bonnie agreed. “I felt the same for a very long time. But he has gone and he can’t come back this time.”

The two women had weakened the hold that Connor had over them both, even from beyond the grave. Heather knew that the secret shared would help them both to make sense of the experience and that by meeting, it would enable them to move on. She could only hope that her dreams would fade too and that she would be free from fear.

That night, Heather told Hiram the name of the boys who had assaulted her all those years before. Somehow, listening to Bonnie talking about her own experiences, she felt able to open up to Hiram, knowing that he would not judge in any way. For Bonnie, it had been a different story; she did not have a loving husband or a man to defend her. That had fallen at Hiram's feet and he had done his best to protect her. He'd defended her from the malicious stories told about her and knew that it had nearly broken her spirit. It hurt Heather to know that people still talked about Bonnie to this day, and she realized with sadness just how cruel people could be. Had she not experienced Connor's brutality for herself, might she have listened to those lies herself? Connor had been good-looking and personable. He had been courteous at times and he was funny. No wonder women have been drawn to him.

While their fantasies about him may have turned out dramatically different than they had hoped, it was easy to fall for someone who could turn on the charm at will. His niceness was tainted with his own bitter intent and one way or another, he had always taken what he wanted. The fact that he had been one of the Laird's sons had protected him. So, few people would even dare to stand up to him. Heather was glad that Hiram had stepped in and given Bonnie a safe place and money to start over. It had been her decision to stay nearby and as a result, she'd had to face the rumors but had eventually married and was at least happy now.

"Hiram I'm ready to tell you everything," Heather had told him when she had entered their chamber later that night.

He looked up at her. "Come and sit beside me."

She did as he asked and curled into his warmth, his arm around her, and he kissed the top of her forehead as she began to tell him the story.

“I had agreed to go out to the dance with Thomas McGillan. I admit I had a slight crush on him at the time, he made me laugh and I thought that meant he was a good guy. You must understand that I was innocent and well, completely naïve. I had been protected, no experiences to speak of. He was so charming. For most of the dance, he was respectful and fun to be with. But then, later that evening, two of his friends arrived and although I did not know it at the time, they added something to the punch. You can imagine the result.” Heather sighed, picturing the scene in her mind’s eye. “It became quite rowdy and, at one point, the aggression got completely out of hand. Luckily, the punch had tasted a little odd to me, so I did not drink much of it.” She shuddered to think what might have happened if she had taken more.

“Thomas, Ronny, and Roland all became inebriated and loud and unruly. At first they were a little funny and although I felt self-conscious and was not used to so much attention, I tried to just smile and not take any of their work seriously. But then, I realized that there was some malicious intent behind their words. Ronnie and Roland constantly made remarks to me telling me how beautiful I was and how a woman like myself needed to experience love. I remember being very embarrassed and then they teased me for blushing and said that I was obviously not a woman yet, but they could turn me into one.” Heather raised her eyes to Hiram’s. “Of course, I refused. I felt uncomfortable. Thomas took them to one side and began to talk to them and I felt such relief and gratitude in that he was protecting me. When he returned to my side he placed his arm protectively around me and I thanked him. But then he bent down to kiss me. I tried to stop him and tried to move away but he held me tight and kept kissing me against my will. I tried to scream but he forced his tongue into my mouth.

“I struggled hard and fought back and he slapped me hard on my face.” Heather shuddered at the thought. “I was in shock, in denial, I couldn’t believe it. The pain radiated across my cheek and up to my

eyes and I couldn't stop crying. I looked up at him in horror, but I could just see this drunken frenzy in his eyes. He wasn't thinking straight. Lust was consuming him." Tears welled up in her eyes and she couldn't stop them rolling down her cheeks. It still felt so vivid.

"It's okay, my love," Hiram said soothingly.

"He was hurting me but didn't care. Then his cousins returned and they all took turns kissing me. I tried to get away but they were holding me against the wall trying to get their hands inside my clothes and groping me. They didn't rape me, but they mauled me and hurt me. I had bruises everywhere and even my face was bruised. It was horrible. My nose was bleeding. When I cried, one would slap me and tell me to shut up. I thought I was going to die. Just as I was losing the battle to protect myself and could feel myself weakening, some older boys saw what was happening and chased the others away. My gratitude was quickly replaced by shame and embarrassment when they lectured me on placing myself in such a vulnerable position by trusting and making myself available. They talked as if it was my fault." Heather swallowed hard.

"I felt sick to the core as if I had teased or led them on. Nothing could be further from the truth. I despise them with every fiber of my being, but worse, I despised myself for being so vulnerable. They made me feel that it was my fault and I had asked for it. My parents were horrified when they saw me and they wanted to tear the town apart until they found the culprits, but I begged and pleaded that they let it go because if they didn't. I was going to move away and never come back. I meant it too. Eventually, my words seeped through their anger and they recognized my distress and that healing meant giving me time and love, and that's what they did. Of course, by then, I bottled up the emotions and determined that no man would ever touch me and that I would never let a man into my life again. I meant that too, until my parents forced me to marry you."

She turned watery eyes to his and he felt her pain. It was raw, like a festering wound that would not heal. He held her hand, stroking the soft skin gently.

"I'm so sorry, my love, you should have never had to experience that.

I feel so angry for you. Did you ever see them again?"

"Thomas lived in the town, but he was older than me and so left shortly afterwards. I heard he had gone to live with his cousins and I suppose they found jobs. So no, I did not have to see them. But occasionally, they would come to the town and I would hide away. I couldn't face seeing them. They sickened me."

"You know, we could still set up a charge against them for your attack." Hiram's eyes were dark and brooding and she could sense the tension in his body.

"No, I do not want that. I cannot face it." She sat up, her body rigid, fear ripping through her.

"But what if they have attacked other women as well? Do you not want to protect others?"

"I would love to see them in prison and beaten in the way that they beat me." She closed her eyes and relished the thought of witnessing it. "But I cannot tell my story Hiram."

"I hate them for what they did to you. They deserve to be punished and I would like nothing more for them to be locked up. But I want to protect you and I love and respect your wishes."

Heather sighed with relief. "Thank you, my love, for believing in me and listening to me. I feel better now. I feel sure now that my nightmares will go. Perhaps the memories resurfaced after Connor's attack on me. It is probably a good thing, and now we can get on with the rest of our lives. We are the lucky ones Hiram; I am convinced of that. We love each other so completely and are committed to each other and not many have that. We also have a wonderful baby to come, so there is happiness for us."

Hiram smiled at her and she noticed the tension lifting from his face.

He nodded. "We have all the time in the world and so much to live for."

He pulled at the soft fabric, letting it fall past her shoulders, and unhooked the remaining garment so that he could stretch the fabric and see her body beneath it. "I think I need to show you how

desirable you are, my Lady.” He grinned mysteriously, all tension leaving him as he bent his head to kiss each breast in turn.

“Well yes, my husband, I think you should show me what to do next.” She slipped off her clothes eagerly and wrapped her arms around him.

It had not taken Hiram long to beat the confession out of the men. In fact, their arrogance and denials had lasted only a short while with their confession coming much too quickly for his liking. He had enjoyed every single second beating them with a leather belt at first, then the horsewhip. At first, Thomas had accused Heather of acting like a whore. He had been defiant, anger blazing in his eyes as he'd delighted in telling Hiram that she had been drinking too much and had been eager to grow up. She'd incited the whole thing. Hiram's rage had been steadily building, his dislike for the man escalating and finally breaking. He had lashed out, connecting his large fist to Thomas's jaw. The power behind the blow knocked the younger man over and he'd rolled over in the straw looking shocked at the force of the attack.

Hiram had sent the young stable boys away. He intended to punish these men but wanted only the older men to bear witness to his savagery. It wasn't a show. It was justice. Each of the three men had protested their innocence and demonstrated Heather's guilt but Hiram's anger had just grown more intense. He discarded the belt for the whip and his satisfaction increased twofold, watching as angry red welts materialized on exposed skin.

Hiram looked at Thomas in disgust. He lay trembling and quietly crying on the floor, curled up in a fetal position, his shirt ripped open and frayed where the horsewhip had done its damage. His pale, insipid-looking skin puckered around the welts. They stood like angry peaks and his satisfaction grew. He knew the deeper cuts would scar and that pleased him. Thomas was whimpering now and pleading, but Hiram didn't want to stop; anger boiled at his core and fueled his desire to create more pain. How dare he treat Heather that way? The

man was spineless, Hiram could see that. He was a poor imitation of a man. In his mid-twenties, he had developed a paunch, the telltale signs of poor posture and too much good living. His eyes, red-rimmed but a cloudless grey, were non-descript. *That just about sums him up*, Hiram thought as he paced up and down. *Aye, this was the punishment for him. Death was too good.*

He wondered if Heather might be shocked by how Thomas looked these days, pre-beating. She'd told him that Thomas had been charming and that she had been flattered at first. Now, with the receding hairline and the long angular face, Hiram could see nothing attractive about this man. He was the man that would have to pay for the pleasure of a woman as no one would voluntarily give themselves to him. With the stable hands standing by, Hiram turned his back on the weeping Thomas and took his anger out on the other two men who were cowering in the corner. They had tried to escape once and had been prepared to leave Thomas to the beating, but the stable hands had thrown them back into the corner where they now skulked.

Summoning up his revulsion for the two men, Hiram grabbed Ronnie by the collar and pinned him up against the wall. Any fight that had been left within him dissipated in an instant when he recognized Hiram's blood lust. He'd also seen the extent of the beating that Thomas had experienced. Hiram was more than capable of repeating the same to this arrogant man. With a grunt, he threw him across the floor, watching him roll several times before trying to get to his feet, his arms extended.

"Please, I'm sorry, I was so young, it was a mistake."

"Aye, and so was she, yet you tried to defile her!"

He brought the horsewhip down with terrifying accuracy and it cracked across the back of Ronnie's shirt, tearing it open, blood oozing out of the vicious welt. Hiram kicked him in the stomach, watching as he doubled over, groaning. Hiram reached forward, dragging him back to his feet, bending his own legs while aiming with malice at his jaw. The blow forced him back and he staggered, hitting the wall behind him, his bones crunching, and he slid to the ground. It was easy to see that he was no fighter.

No, he thought in disgust, *he would just prey on helpless young girls instead.*

Since Heather had confided in him, Hiram had sent some of his men to go and find out more about the culprits. They'd been discreet in their investigation and Hiram knew their movements, what they had done over the years and their favorite places to visit. It had been all too easy to kidnap them and bring them here under cover of darkness. It had not been a surprise to know that they did not work on the land. They had a modest income provided through their families but were not wealthy. But they had attitude and, he could tell, little respect for women. Even without Heather's admission, he would have despised these men on sight anyway. They were everything he deplored about men: pasty, weak, and ineffectual. These were the type of men who preyed on women, uncaring as to the consequences.

Anger boiled up within him again. He picked up the horsewhip, lashing out blow after blow on Ronnie's chest, leaving only a bloodied mass. Far from his anger reducing, he turned his attentions to the last man who was already crying and begging in the corner. Hiram dragged him out, throwing him on top of a wooden bench, arms down either side. Struggling, the stable hands rushed to hold him down while Hiram whipped him. He could feel every muscle in his body as taut and powerful. Energy coursed through his veins. He wanted to...*needed* to punish this man, to avenge for the torment that they collectively had inflicted upon her. He could only imagine how sick she had felt and how frightened. No wonder she had not wanted to become involved with any man since. There was no doubt in his mind that the actions of these men had triggered that initial reluctance for love. He brought the whip down hard on the exposed skin, welt upon welt materialized, a crisscross pattern that would never heal properly. *Justice comes in all forms*, he thought grimly. Their wounds would remind them of their actions forever. Finally, he let the whip drop and threw it into the middle of the stable.

He suddenly felt exhausted, cleansed. He had avenged.

"Throw them in the cells overnight," he ordered the stable hands. "And we'll release them tomorrow, once they've had time to consider their actions and the punishment."

Glancing around, he felt a slight pang of conscience, wondering if the men would survive the night, but shrugged the feeling away. If they didn't, it was no more than they deserved, and he knew he would not lose any sleep. His shirt was covered with blood; the force of his blows had sent blood splatters across his face, his clothes, and all over the stables. He wiped his hand with an old cloth and began to head back to the castle. He needed to wash away the evidence of his anger. As he strode away, down the old cobbled path towards the castle entrance, his sister Maggie and Heather were walking arm in arm across the green and both looked at him in surprise, taking in his disheveled and bloodied appearance.

"Hiram?" Heather's voice penetrated his thoughts.

He looked at her with dismay, guilt in his eyes. He had not wanted her to witness this. The guilt flickered and then dissipated.

In that second she knew. "What have you done?"

He saw no point in denying it. "Justice."

Heather gasped. "Hiram, are they dead?"

He shook his head. "Sadly not. But let's just say that if one of them died tonight, I won't let it stop me from sleeping soundly."

Maggie moved towards her brother. "Don't be like Connor. Don't lose yourself in your anger."

"You don't need to worry, Maggie." His features softened. "They had this coming. But, I didn't intend to kill them, I want them to remember what happened today and why. That is a far more suitable punishment."

Hiram turned and walked away, his stride lengthening. He couldn't deny that he had enjoyed inflicting pain on them. But now he wanted to rid himself of his soiled clothes and longed to relax in hot water so that he could be cleansed for his deeds. He hoped this would lay Heather's ghosts to rest; knowing that they had been punished should enable her to move on from it...finally. He knew there would be no repercussions from his actions. They were too weak, too pathetic to do more than crawl away the moment the opportunity arose. They

wouldn't dare go to the authorities and knew this was a fitting justice for their actions. He ordered a bath to be drawn, barking at one of the servants as he walked past. He registered the look of shock on her face as he strode past, but she scuttled away to do his bidding. She never uttered a word about his bloodied state but he knew that they would be talking about what had happened that night.

He still had to figure out how to deal with his mother. Although she rarely came out of her room and joined in with the rest of them, he wondered whether the birth of a first grandchild would encourage her mood. She preyed on his mind. He saw her going steadily insane in those quarters. The signs were there. He would not be surprised if losing his father and then Connor would have tipped her over the edge.

In the old days, he would have given anything to have made her love him but that had never really happened. He'd dreamt about it recently, recalling how many times he had tried to impress and please his mother, but it was never good enough. He had felt the pain all over again. The rejection, the cruel jibes, the withering looks. Then, in his dream, Heather had given birth to a little boy, and his mother had claimed it was Connor reincarnated. Hiram had cried out in horror. That couldn't be happening. Connor was gone. He could never hurt them again. But then he looked down at his son and recognized pure evil flashing in the baby's eyes. Another dream that tormented him was that his mother stole the baby and disappeared. She would raise him to be another Connor.

When Hiram had woken, drenched in a cold sweat, he knew that he would never leave her alone with his child.



As the days passed into weeks, it became obvious that Heather was with child. She looked more adorable than ever although he could see the tiredness as she struggled to lie comfortably.

"Are you sure you are not carrying twins?" he'd mocked.

She was beautiful but her abdomen was expanding quickly, and he

was in awe that their child lay within. He couldn't believe her delicate skin could stretch so much. The baby was kicking now. He'd watched the skin raise and the movement across the front of her stomach. At one time, he was convinced he'd seen a small hand pressing against the skin, wanting to be acknowledged. Hiram had placed his hand against that place, wondering if his child could feel the warmth from his own hand as well as his presence. Tears stung his eyes. He'd never felt so much for such a tiny unborn being.

He reached up and stroked her breasts, feeling the weight of them in his hands. She loved his touch and moved closer. "You are so beautiful. It won't be long now before we are three."

"This has to be the fastest pregnancy ever. Each morning I feel like I have grown even bigger." Heather laughed. "It is the most incredible feeling, knowing that I carry our precious child within me. I feel I am doing something important." She stroked her abdomen with affection. "Even though my body will never be the same again." She glared at Hiram in mock frustration.

"You have never looked so beautiful. "

He meant it. Pregnancy suited her. Apart from her tiredness and her need to sleep so much more, she was the same loving woman. She kept him involved with the pregnancy and liked him to see the changes to her body. This openness connected them at a deeper level. She had never tired of sex either and that had surprised him.

It was almost as if she had read his mind as she leaned against him provocatively, sitting with her legs over his. "I can't let you go off with some young scullery maid, can I?"

She'd smiled at him expectantly and he was happy to oblige. It took him only seconds to let desire wash over him. He almost groaned aloud at the thought of what was to come. He lifted her and prepared to enter her willing body. She was ready for him and as he sank into her depths, he sighed in pure pleasure. No movement was needed. It was enough right now to just be inside her. Her muscles rippled across his length as if playing a tune and he loved the rhythm. They were so connected. These were tender lovemaking sessions. He didn't want to hurt the baby or her. But like this, he felt that they were a part of each

other. He wasn't excluded but they were one. He took one nipple in his mouth and licked it gently. It was all she needed before wave after wave of pure excitement built up like a crescendo and then the contractions around him teased him to his own climax.

"When our baby is born, I want to start thinking about having more children." He murmured against the softness of her skin. "Are you willing?"

"More than willing," she murmured back, still in the moment. "I have never felt so happy as being pregnant. It is such a miracle."

"Two more then."

She smiled at him, her eyes shining.

"Three more," he corrected, then shook his head. "What am I thinking? You are still young. Five more babies before I let you rest." He laughed loudly.

"Only five? I was thinking there would be more!" She laughed.

Groaning at the thought of leaving his loving arms, she moved away from him to fetch her clothes, struggling to pull the dresses over her expanding body. He watched as she dressed, feeling a sense of pride at how beautiful she was. He'd seen the way everyone looked at her. She was stunning and now, since the pregnancy was becoming so obvious, he knew that every male envied him. He silently thanked his father for arranging the marriage. What would he have done if he had never met her? Been in some loveless strained relationship, never knowing the joy that true love brought. He wished his father could see how happy they were.

"What are we going to do about your mother?" Heather queried. "Now that she knows about the baby, she is starting to seek me out more."

"Is she? Are you worried?" he asked, remembering his own disturbed dreams.

"A little," Heather admitted. "Part of me thinks that it will give her a new lease on life. The other part of me thinks that I never want her near us. I can't forgive her for her treatment towards you or how she

behaved with Connor. It was sickening.”

“Agreed,” Hiram said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “We could wait until after the baby’s born so that she has some time with the baby but then send her to her sister’s in England with the excuse that we need time alone as a new family.”

“That’s a possibility.” Heathers face brightened. “Do you think she will like that?”

“We can but hope. I have also got to sort out something for my sister.”

“What if we sent your mother away before the baby was born with a vague understanding that she would come back afterwards, but, maybe we don’t really go into detail about it?”

Hiram smiled. “Yes, go and see her sister in England now while she can but sort of leave it as a permanent arrangement. I like it. Better that she spends no time with the baby, as she might not leave willingly. I will arrange it first thing.”

As Hiram made his way down the staircase, he felt a sense of relief. He could tolerate her presence here while she had been reclusive but now that she was pestering Heather, he was reluctant for her to stay. Hiram didn’t trust her one little bit. When it came to children, who knew what she might do?

“*I*t has been so peaceful without her,” Maggie admitted to Heather.

“I know, I hate to say it as she is your mother, but she brought a dark feeling to the castle.”

“Hiram seems happier too,” Maggie remarked as he served them both drinks. “You have him trained well I see.” She laughed.

“It is one of the perks of being pregnant. That and looking like a whale washed up on the coastline.” Heather looked at her expanding abdomen. “Soon, I will not be able to walk.”

“You are still very slim though. From behind you look the same. You are carrying all at the front. I think you are having a boy. It is my prediction.” Maggie reached out to touch Heather’s stomach. “May I?”

Heather nodded. “Boy or girl, there is a lot of activity going on in there.” As if on cue, Maggie squealed with delight as the baby kicked and Heather flinched. “See what I mean?”

“Aye, it is so exciting. I cannot wait to experience it for myself but that is not likely to happen.”

“Is there no one that you like Maggie?” Heather queried.

Maggie blushed bright red to the tips of her light ginger roots.

Heather gasped. “So there is! Does Hiram know?”

“Nobody knows,” Maggie said, still red-faced. “I am not ready to discuss it. I don’t even know how he feels about me.”

“Can I help? We can arrange a marriage for you.”

“No, no, please don’t.” Maggie blushed again. “I need a little time.”

Heather squeezed her hand. “You know we are here for you. Whatever you need.”

Maggie smiled at her with appreciation. “Aye, I know. It means a lot to me. But, let’s get this little bairn out of you first.” She stroked Heather’s stomach again. “Have you decided on names?”

“No, we are still thinking. It’s such an important decision that we want to take our time.”

Hiram finished with his serving duties and came and sat down by them. “Enjoying the sun ladies? Make the most of it. I can see storm clouds on the horizon.”

Maggie pulled a face. “Oh, away with you. Don’t say it. Stop with the storm clouds. We have had enough of the wet stuff.”

Heather nodded. “We were saying how much lighter the mood is now and you have gone and spoiled it Hiram.”

“Because Mother has gone? I agree. I never realized just how oppressive she was until she was not here. With Connor gone too, the castle feels more welcoming.”

Maggie shivered.

“What is it?” Hiram frowned.

“Someone’s just walked over my grave.”

“Even the mention of his name impacts people. Even now.” Heather felt a sense of sadness.

Maggie shuddered. “He was so cruel. He used to hit me when I was a wee child. Told me if I showed anyone the bruises, he would say I was making it up. Of course that’s crazy, but I knew that Mother believed every word he said.”

“You should have told me Maggie.” Hiram felt her pain. “I could have done something.”

“What? You were as much a victim as me. In a different way, maybe. But, you got blamed for everything else.”

"I'm sorry." Hiram closed his eyes against the anger that rumbled within him. There was no point letting the emotion get the better of him. Connor was dead and buried, he couldn't hurt them anymore, not really. But the past had a way of filtering back into the present. "We should have faced this years ago. Stood up to them all. Made Father aware of it."

"I think we all have some healing to do. Talking about it takes away the power from him. It clears the air. I think we all must agree now that as a family unit, we stick together and that your mother understands that we are strong and resilient. Maybe when she comes back, she will change her ways," Heather stated firmly. "We are aware of what happened with Connor and you both suffered more than me, but his actions have left physical and emotional scars. However, he is dead. If we talk about it, we heal."

"Do you think Mother can change?" Maggie asked Hiram.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I can't say as I miss her either. I hope she is having fun with her sister. I just hope she stays, and we can have the baby without her influencing him or her," Hiram said.

"Oh, especially if you had a boy," Maggie commented. "You know she would want you to name the baby Connor. The question is who would she be thinking of? Her brother, or her son? I think that there might be more to the brother story myself. Don't you?"

Hiram frowned. "I don't know. I only remember a bit about her brother. He died when young I think. But I spent much of my time avoiding mother and Connor."

"We will probably never really know the truth, but I am sure there was something strange there," Maggie mused.

Hiram nodded, contemplating his own situation. "I am still shocked that she agreed with my marriage to Heather. She pushed us to get married so quickly. I know she said it was to help people forget about my father's death. But, I don't get it." Hiram said to his sister.

Maggie thought for a few moments. "Well, let's think about it logically. You and Heather met and your father had stated he wanted the two of you married. Not that what father wanted ever really

influenced mother unless he really put his foot down, but I do wonder if she had other plans for Connor. She would have wanted better for him.” Maggie blushed, placing her hand on Heather’s. “I just mean, she might have wanted someone with more money or more land or a title for him. You know how she was about money and title.”

Hiram shook his head. “Or perhaps, deep down, she knew Connor wouldn’t treat any woman right, and she avoided it that way. I want to believe that she was aware of his sickness. If he married, he would be expected to act like a husband. That was never going to happen.”

“I don’t know, but I am tired of thinking about Connor,” Heather said and stretched. “I am just going to stroll through the maze. Get some exercise.”

Hiram looked at her. “Don’t overdo it. You are not eating enough, and you are so tired.”

“I know, I am trying to eat more. I think the baby is consuming it all.” She laughed. “Must be a boy.” Heather grinned. “I am tired though. The baby is pushing on my bladder and making me go to the bathroom all the time.”

“You must be getting closer to the date of birth,” Hiram said, trying to encourage her.

“It won’t be long. Apparently, the midwife said the head has engaged. I can’t wait until the baby arrives. I am sure I will still be up all the time...however, I won’t be waddling around, or struggling to get up off the bed at night,” Heather joked.

Heather stretched her back and then, giving Hiram a quick kiss on the cheek, she wandered off to the maze.

“You are worried, Brother,” Maggie said once Heather was out of earshot.

Hiram nodded. “She was having nightmares. They seem to have stopped now but, they were disturbing her sleep.”

“Connor-related?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. It settled after I gave those men a good

thrashing before. She seemed to be more peaceful but then it started again. She was worried about mother, but now that problem has gone. She seems to be anxious at times. Like she is seeing something that is not there. Maybe those damn ghost stories about Connor walking the grounds is getting to her.”

“She did nearly die at his hands,” Maggie stated. “I mean, how do you get over that?”

Hiram shook his head. He felt frustrated, helpless, and knew there was little he could do. Time was moving so fast and he felt he couldn’t keep up with it. He felt as if he hadn’t even grown used to the pregnancy, yet the baby would be here soon. She must feel the same. He was worried. Not just about Heather, but whether he could cope.

“You are frowning. What are you thinking?”

“Aye, I was.” He grimaced. “I can’t help but wonder if I can cope with a wee thing that will be demanding my time.” He tried to laugh but Maggie could see the concern in his eyes.

“You will be fine. I know you Hiram. You will be the best father ever.”

“Do you really think so?” He looked at her gratefully.

“Aye, I know so and I am going to be the best auntie.” She laughed. “You know, I think that the two of you are just getting anxious because you know that having a wee-un around the place is going to change your lives. It won’t be the two of you now, you will be three, a family. Although it will change, it will make it even better.”

Hiram felt his eyes mist with emotion. She was right. It was just last-minute fears and he would protect their child with his life if he had to. “Thank you.”

Heather walked slowly out of the maze. “I think I have had enough exercise for today. I am getting a few pains.”

“The baby? It is coming?”

“No, I don’t think so. Just reminding me to not overdo it.” Heather laughed, lowering herself gratefully in the chair.

“I am worried about leaving you.” Hiram frowned. “I have to attend a

meeting soon and I just wish I knew when our child might make an appearance.”

“How long will you be gone?” Heather felt her mood drop. As Laird, he had responsibilities, but she hated him going away.

“A couple of days, my love. Maximum. I will not be staying longer than necessary, but it is important.” He frowned; it was going to be far from easy. The clan McCloud could be difficult when it suited them, but he needed them on side.

“Where are you going?” Maggie asked.

“I have to arrange a deal with the McCloud clan. Not looking forward to it. No doubt they will expect the earth if we want them on side.”

Maggie blushed but said nothing. Heather looked at her quizzically. She had an idea. “Doesn’t the Laird there have all those strapping young sons? Perhaps we could arrange something. How about a marriage?”

Maggie shrunk in her chair, trying to be innocuous.

Hiram sighed. “But which one? There are four of them. Not sure if they have a brain cell between them.”

Maggie gasped. “Heath is not stupid! He is very interesting, actually. You’ve just never bothered to talk to him. If you did, you would be surprised.”

Hiram almost laughed but Heather nudged him. “You like him don’t you?”

Maggie turned bright red again. “Aye, I do.”

“How does he feel about you?” Heather asked.

“He tells me I am beautiful. But I am smart enough to know that boys don’t always mean what they say,” Maggie said.

Heather smiled. “Yes, they are quite difficult to understand at times.” She looked at Hiram and winked.

“Maggie and Heath?” His mind was racing. He would never have thought about it, but it could be a solution. He needed to check that

the man would take care of Maggie, that his feelings were genuine. But if it worked, it would be excellent for both clans.



Later that night, Hiram pulled Heather into his arms as they lay on the bed. “So, do you think Maggie and Heath would be a good idea? I don’t know the boy at all,” Hiram asked her.

“Maggie told me all about him, he sounds like a very nice lad. I would want to see their interaction with one another before I answer though,” Heather told him.

“I had a feeling you would say that. So, what do you think of having a ball in a few weeks? We can officially meet this Heath, and his family. We can watch how he treats Maggie and decide from there,” Hiram said.

“Well, won’t you have to offer the idea before the ball?” Heather asked.

“Aye, that’s true.”

“If we don’t think they are right together, won’t his family get upset if we back out?” Heather asked.

“Aye, well I guess we will have to hope Maggie is really in love, and that Heath is mature enough to treat her right. Though it could be a solution to our problems.”

“Maggie is more than a solution—if it’s not right, she does not get married. She deserves real love. We will find another way if need be.” Heather turned to kiss her husband, pulling him down to her. And then all conversation stopped.

Hiram made the offer of marriage between Maggie and Heath and after some discussions, the provisional plans had been agreed. It was a triumph. He had not expected it to be received so well but Hiram had an idea that the old laird knew about the attraction between Heath and Maggie. It had taken no convincing at all. Either that, or he was glad to get at least one of the sons married off. He'd requested that the clan's colors be used alongside their own when decorating the hall for the forthcoming ball.

In just two weeks, the preparations were ready. *The servants have outdone themselves*, Hiram thought with real appreciation. The clan's colors were displayed everywhere, with candles lighting up the area at night. It was so beautiful that Hiram had insisted Heather attend although she had warned him she could not stay long.

He looked at his wife in the mirror and whistled. "You have to be the most beautiful pregnant woman ever." He kissed her.

"You aren't too bad yourself Laird MacGregor!" She kissed him back. "I hope you will understand if I need to go back to our rooms. I feel very uncomfortable at the moment."

"Of course, my sweet. You must be careful." He kissed her cheek and thought how incredible she looked in her outfit. It fitted snugly across her breasts making them seem fuller than normal. The dress nipped in just beneath the breasts and expanded out so that her growing stomach had room. Hiram knew he just wanted to ravage her, but it was getting too late in the pregnancy to demand the same level of attention from her. She was willing, always ready for his advances, but her energy levels were flagging. He could wait until she was ready. As much as he became frustrated at times, their love was worth more than the sexual connection between them.

“Did you help Maggie pick out the right gown for tonight?” he asked, trying to change his thoughts quickly.

“Yes, you should see it...well, you will in a few moments!” Heather laughed.

Hiram stood by Heather waiting for Maggie to arrive. He gasped as she moved towards him. He had to admit she looked beautiful. She was a lovely person but tonight, she was stunning. He loved her and admired her temperament and her presence, though now she was no longer his kid sister but a woman finally. Heather had helped her fix her hair and dress and with her hair coiled neatly on top of her head, long, pale red strands hung around her neck. She looked classy and graceful. Heather had chosen a green dress that brought out her coloring beautifully.

Hiram watched as Laird McCloud and his family walked up to them.

“It is a very lovely evening tonight, a perfect night for a ball to celebrate the coupling of two young people.”

Laird McCloud clapped Hiram on the back in a welcoming gesture and Hiram shook hands with him. They both smiled at each other in great satisfaction.

“How are you feeling Heath? You are the man of the hour of course.” Hiram focused his gaze on the young man before him. Heath was nervous. He nodded and grinned but not before blushing. He was good-looking in a subdued way and seemed embarrassed to be in the spotlight.

Heather noticed him looking in admiration at Maggie and smiled to herself.

“This is Heath, my youngest son,” Laird McCloud introduced the boy to Heather.

“It is very nice to meet you tonight Lady MacGregor,” Heath said to her.

She bowed to him. “It is very nice to meet you as well.”

Heath turned to Maggie and he smiled brightly at her. His face

transformed in an instant and suddenly Heather knew why Maggie was drawn to him. He wore his innocence with deep integrity. Studious, but there was substance about him. He was obviously deeply attracted to Maggie and their forthcoming union was very welcome to him. He looked as if he couldn't quite believe his luck.

"I think they really do like one another?" Hiram whispered to Heather and she nodded, grinning happily. It was perfect.

She watched as Maggie smiled up at Heath brightly and how their fingers reached out to touch each other. For a second, the tension between them sizzled and they both blushed. Heather could only hope that it would develop into real love, and not just be something fleeting between the young couple. This had been the type of meeting she had hoped to have when she'd first come to Castle MacGregor.

Her mind floated back to her first meeting with Hiram. She had been so mad at her father; he had not given her a choice telling her she must marry Hiram. But, it had turned out so incredibly well and here she was now, about to have their first child. She couldn't be happier. So much had changed since then. She'd been a young happy girl and now she was a woman. A year had passed, and she remembered the wedding night with some amusement. She'd been so innocent and absolutely petrified. She'd obeyed his demands and had enjoyed them, once the embarrassment and initial pain had gone. Since that first early attempt, her love and sexual appetite had grown substantially. Now, she bore the evidence of their frenzied lovemaking. Heather rubbed her stomach and felt the wee child kick inside of her and groaned in pain. Suddenly, she felt different. She'd had twinges before but now this was happening regularly.

Hiram was right beside her in an instance, fear on his face. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think he or she wants to arrive...just about now," Heather said quietly, so only Hiram could hear it.

He escorted her to their room immediately and called for the midwife. Everything was ready for the birth and he felt anticipation and excitement within him. He quickly went to make his apologies to Laird McCloud. "It seems as if my wife has decided to go into labor."

He laughed. "What timing. We will retire to our chambers for now," he told the Laird.

"My best wishes for an easy delivery. We wait eagerly for the news." Laird McCloud was jovial and knew all too well the experiences that lay ahead for Hiram. He promised to look after the ball in his absence.

Hiram ran back up the stairs. Heather needed him. The baby was coming. His mind raced frantically. He had never been so scared before. Breathing hard, he entered the room. The doctor and midwife were by her side, calming her.

"It won't be long now," the doctor told him, smiling. "This one is a natural."

Heather smiled weakly at Hiram before groaning in pain as another contraction rippled through her.



Maggie smiled up at Heath. "You look very charming tonight," she told him as he twirled her around the dance floor.

"You look so beautiful Maggie. I am the envy of all who are here. My brothers are so jealous that I am to marry you," Heath said.

"I only have eyes for you," she admitted.

"I am so glad to hear you say this. I did not think I would ever have a chance with you," Heath said.

"I am so excited to be your wife. I cannot believe this is happening so suddenly." Maggie breathed heavily, her eyes shining.

"My father is happy because our clans are joining and he must do what is best for our clan, but he likes Hiram, and this suits all our needs," He confided in her. "Especially mine, because I get to kiss you and soon, will be making love to you." He blushed.

"I cannot wait for that moment." She blushed too. The thought was terrifying and yet, she wanted to lie with him. She could think of nothing else.

“Soon,” he whispered and held her close.



Heather held the wee baby in her arms. The labor had lasted for hours, but Hiram had stayed with her throughout. It had not been an easy birth, but the presence of the doctor and local midwife had reassured her. Hiram had kept her calm although she knew he was terrified. With each growing contraction, there was no holding back and finally, a beautiful baby boy had been handed to her. Now, cleaned up and wrapped in a blanket, he nestled against her, his little face pink from his sudden entry into the world. The ball had finally ended, and Heather felt herself relax now that peace settled over the castle once more. Hiram couldn't take his eyes away from his new son.

“He's a beautiful baby, my dear,” Hiram said. “I am so proud of you.”

When it was time to feed the wee boy, Hiram watched for a moment as the baby struggled to find the offered nipple and then began to suckle instinctively. Heather settled back against the pillow, her long red tresses flowing over the white pillowcases, her eyes closed. Hiram left the room; he was so filled with emotion and he needed a moment to contemplate what this meant. His stomach rumbled. He hadn't eaten for hours so he made his way to the kitchens.

Some of the servants were still up and were cleaning after the ball. “Laird, good evening. Can we get you something?”

Hiram nodded. He asked for a couple of plates of food to be made ready for them and while he waited, they all congratulated him. He couldn't stop grinning. He knew they would have all heard his new son bawling the place down. *The sound echoes around the castle, but it makes this place come alive*, he thought. Hiram was flushed with excitement but overwhelmed. He wanted to cry, or dance, or just think. He didn't know what to do.



“We must decide on a name,” Heather told him once the baby was safely sleeping in his crib. “What about Hiram Jr.? He will be just like

his father and so, perhaps we name him after you?”

“I am not sure. Perhaps he deserves a name of his own.” Hiram thought for a moment. “Perhaps a middle name could be Patrick? Or, even my name as well?”

“Oh, what about Alastair? I was looking into names before and it means defender. This wee lad will have to defend this land when he is older. What do you think?”

“Alistair Patrick Hiram MacGregor,” Hiram mused. “I love it.” He bent over his son who was sleeping soundly. “Hello my wee chap.”

“Don’t wake him,” Heather pleaded, trying to eat a little bit of the food that Hiram had brought to her. Her body ached and it no longer felt like hers. She knew in time that her body would heal again but she just wanted to curl up and sleep deeply.

Baby Alistair let out a cry that made Hiram jump.

“I didn’t wake him,” he told Heather quickly. “Perhaps he is still hungry?”

“I thought he’d had enough. Bring him to me please. I don’t think I can walk yet.” She laughed.

Hiram picked him up gently, almost afraid to hold him too tightly. He passed his son to Heather and she tucked him against her breast. In seconds, he had latched to the offered nipple.

“Just like his father,” she whispered to Hiram mischievously.

“Aye, that’s true. It won’t be long before I will be playing with those breasts again but for now, my son needs his food.” Hiram laughed. “I am in such awe. Your body has given me such gifts.”

They both watched in total delight as Alistair suckled greedily. She looked at the wee lad and immediately felt the most intense love she had ever felt. It was so different from the way she felt with her husband; this was an overwhelming protective love. A love that made her want to hold him close and never let him go. There was a part of her that could see how being a mother could be so overwhelming, as the love was like nothing else. She vowed never to turn out like

Hiram's mother. Possessive love was not a good love at all.

Heather studied Alistair as he slept in her arms. His hair was quite dark on top of his head and thick and wavy. She'd been surprised by this but had been told that hair color often changed. His cheeks were not as chubby as other newborns she had seen and wondered if it was because she had not been able to keep food down for much of the pregnancy. "If I had been able to eat more, you would be a fat lad," she told him in a voice that held much love in it. He had finished suckling but had fallen asleep, still latched to her breast. There was a faint trace of milk on his lips that she found adorable.

"Would you like to put him back in the crib for me?" she asked.

Hiram took their child from her and rocked him quietly back to sleep. "Shh, don't cry Alistair, Daddy has you."

Heather smiled as she watched their interaction. Hiram was as in love with their baby as she was.



Heather fell asleep but continued to stir every time Alistair gurgled. She was terrified that something would happen to him. Her dreams changed that night. It was no longer Connor taunting her from the shadows but fear that her precious baby would not wake up. She listened for his breath in the darkness and then, as sleep gradually claimed her, would wake in a panic that he had stopped breathing. In the morning she felt exhausted but rose out of bed to feed him, reassured that he was hungry.

He was greedy. Throughout the day, she realized she was feeding him almost every hour. As he cried, she could feel herself producing enough milk to feed hundreds of children. No one had warned her about that, she thought wryly. But she couldn't worry about it. If he needed food, she would feed him. He needed to be strong. She had never imagined the joy of being a mother. Giving birth to another being was a miracle. She knew she would want more even though the labor had been long and difficult. Once her body settled again and she'd had time to rest, she would ask Hiram if they could try straight

away for another one. His idea of having many children appealed to her. They would fill this castle with joy and noise and make it a home.

Heather felt her eyes closing as she fed the baby. She had barely been able to sleep since his birth two weeks ago. She slept only for a few minutes before he cried to be changed or needed feeding. He slept little so by default, she did too. Hiram tried his best but only she could feed him. She was terrified that she might fall asleep while doing so. What if she rolled over and squashed him? He was so tiny after all.

That night, sleep had not come at all. She'd lain awake listening to Hiram breathing deeply. He had been providing some manual labor working with the men today and so he was exhausted too. He didn't need to do the work, but he liked to. He said it was always best to lead by example. It was a good motto to follow. At times, baby Alistair would make little snuffling sounds; she would have to get up and check he could breathe alright. Several times she had panicked and would grab him, waking him up, and his cries would echo around their quarters. Sometimes Hiram would sleep through the noise but she doubted the rest of the castle got much sleep.

Hiram had noticed how tired Heather looked, and he was worried about her. While she still looked curvy, she appeared drawn. There were dark circles under her eyes and her cheekbones seemed more prominent.

"I am worried about you," he told her. "You are not looking well."

She burst into tears and he went to her immediately. "What is it?"

"I am so afraid," she cried.

"Why? What is it?" Hiram was aghast. He knew that she was not sleeping well but he was afraid as to what she might say.

"I fear our baby will stop breathing in the middle of the night. Because of that, I cannot sleep at night. I fall asleep when you take him during the day, but only for a few moments. My thoughts seem all fractured, and I cannot seem to remember things," she told him.

Hiram looked at her sympathetically. "I am going to take Alistair out with me for a few hours. So, you must feed him now and he will be fine with me. No arguments. You, Milady, will then get some sleep." He picked their baby up from his crib and placed him in her arms as she settled on the bed. He watched with pleasure as she peeled the top layer of her dress down and a plump breast was offered to their son. Alistair seemed to know instinctively that it meant food and his little hands reached out to hold the breast while he latched on, greedily feeding. Hiram felt he could stay watching this forever. There was something so incredible about it. His wife, her body designed to give him such pleasure that also offered protection for the baby during pregnancy was incredible and now, she was able to nurture their child, and feeding on demand. Milk trickled down his son's chin as he guzzled. He stopped contentedly for a moment, the nipple still in his mouth. As if trying to digest the quantity of milk, the baby breathed in the scent of his mother and started to suckle again.

"He doesn't want to stop." Heather laughed.

"I don't blame him." Hiram smiled, wiping away the milk from Alistair's tiny chin. "My son will be a warrior, well, he will if he keeps eating like this." He reached out to touch Heather's cheek. "My love, would you like the doctor to come and give you something to help you sleep?"

She shook her head. "No, not while I am breastfeeding. I don't want him to have medicine in his system. I just need a few hours' sleep."

Finally, Alistair seemed to have eaten his fill. Hiram took him from her and he prepared his son for a few hours outside. He made Heather lie down and get some rest. He held his son in his arms and cooed at the child. He was already getting much bigger than he had been at birth. Hiram had been amazed at the amount of times he would find Heather feeding him.

He knew that motherhood was tiring. It had to be. Her body had just

provided the miracle of life. It had to have sapped her energy and without sleep or enough food, she would not stay well. He had to help her more. But this was a start. Alistair could come out on the land with him. He was all wrapped up and ready to go out into the big wide world. Hiram had the desire to take him out onto the land so he could touch his son's little feet to the ground. It was an old family tradition that his father had told him about. He was a Scot and a future laird and therefore, he must feel a connection with their land.

If he was out of the way, then Heather would not be able to hear him cry, so sleep might come. He looked at her now; her eyes were heavy and already sleep was nudging at the edge of her conscious mind. She succumbed to its demands before he had even closed the door.

Alistair was six-months-old already. He looked so different. He had been feeding well and had settled into a routine. Now that Heather was more relaxed, Alistair was too. Their bond was incredibly strong. It was intuitive. When she was happy, her son was. It seemed to be that simple. When she was grumpy, her son was too.

For now, though, he was fast asleep again and looking angelic. His dark waves had turned into a deep auburn and he looked just like his father. Heather was so proud of him; she loved that her son was the image of the man she adored so much. He was breathing evenly in his crib and swaddled in blankets. He was a relaxed and happy baby and Heather felt she had learned a lot about motherhood in those six months. It had taken her time to learn what to do. Some of it was instinctive but her mother had helped her to consider the practical elements.

She felt more like her old self. Her parents had stayed in the castle for a month which had been such a joy. Hiram had called for them and explained how tired Heather was and he felt she needed her parents. They had been delighted and had taken control of looking after her. They took care of Alistair and made sure Heather went to sleep and that she ate properly. It had made such a difference having them here. But now they had gone, and Heather had other things on her mind.

Hiram was still on the bed, not fully awake, and Heather joined him, kissing his chest and stroking the contours of his chest and stomach.

"You know that makes me excited," he reminded her.

"Aye, I know. I just figured that while Alistair is asleep, we could have a little grown-up time." She smiled a wicked smile as she straddled his waist.

Hiram sighed in pleasure, freeing her breasts from her gown so that they pointed towards him. "They are still so big and so beautiful." He sighed in appreciation.

"Aye, they may stay that way too. But if not, they will return once you impregnate me again." She laughed huskily. "Whenever you are ready." She slipped her gown all the way down and where before her stomach had been fully flat and flawless, now he saw how pregnancy had shaped her. She was beautiful, a woman in every sense of the word. Her stomach was no longer completely flat, but, in so many ways, this new curvier Heather was even more exciting to him. He loved her deeply. She just had to look at him and he desired her. He had tried so hard not to be demanding or think about his own needs but now she had requested attention and he would give her what she needed. He pulled her close and slid inside her. She was ready for him and sighed in deep pleasure as he moved within her.

"I have missed this my love." She kissed him gently as he moved gently and with love.

"This is perfect. Feels so amazing. I love you Heather." He held her tightly, emotional at their physical reunion. "Are you sure you are ready? I mean, I could make you pregnant...it may be too soon."

"If it happens, then I will be happy."

"I want more children my love. But I don't want to hurt..."

"Ssh," she told him. "I am ready to be your wife again."

He pulled her down to kiss her and rolled over so he was now on top and in control. He wanted to be gentle and had to fight the desire to take her hard. He was desperate for the release. He ached for her. It had been too long a wait. He knew he wouldn't be able to contain himself for long. She moaned loudly as he pushed her into oblivion with an orgasm that seemed to last several minutes.

"Hiram, that was amazing!" Her breathing was fast and hard and as he continued to move within her, he gave a cry of pleasure until his own release came.

They lay quietly recovering from their union. No words were

necessary. Life was moving full circle. Hiram felt blessed. While it had been difficult to hold back from her for months, he'd been worried about hurting her and knew that their priorities had to change. He was responsible for her and for their son. It was a responsibility that filled him with joy. The fears had subsided.



"How are the preparations coming along for Maggie and Heath's big day?" She nestled against Hiram, listening to his heartbeat gradually slowing after their sudden passion.

"Slowly, apparently. Maggie is insisting on doing much of the preparations herself and it must be perfect."

"Oh of course." Heather laughed. "She is in love. It is her big day and she is very determined."

"Once she moves out, this castle is going to feel a little empty," he admitted

"All the more reason to fill this place with our offspring." Heather laughed at the prospect. "Perhaps a daughter next time. Although, it does not matter to me. I just want us to have a big family. Can you imagine the noise here when we have lots of children running around?" She giggled at the thought.

"It will be a home," Hiram said, sighing with pleasure at the prospect.

"You know I am shocked that we haven't received any letters from your mother," Heather said. "Not even a congratulations for the baby. Maggie hasn't heard from her about the wedding either."

"Don't curse us dear. I am happy that she hasn't reached out. After all, she basically disowned us when we suggested she leave," he stated dryly.

Heather looked at him. "I know but she was torn between seeing her sister and staying for the baby. It does seem odd."

"You know, I think that my mother is happy over there. They did not see each other for years and now she is seeing her sister and the three

children. Perhaps it is what she needed.”

“They are all grown up I assume. I hope they are not tainted in the same way as her?”

“Let’s stop talking about her. I feel like we are sending out signals to the world that we want to see her. The last thing I want is her showing up here.” Hiram shuddered at the thought.

“I agree, Alistair would be in her grasp, and who knows what she would do to him.”

“Probably change his name and try and convince him he can do anything to anyone. You know, how she did with Connor,” Hiram commented.

“Anyway, let’s talk about happier things as you said, like your sister and her betrothed,” Heather suggested.

“Heath and Maggie will be married soon. She is so happy. Every time I look at her, she is smiling. I can see the joy. Did I look like that?”

“You still do my dear, as do I.” Heather laughed. “You can’t hide pure happiness.”

He smiled. “Even Laird McCloud is happy. He sent a messenger here yesterday to show me the program for the wedding and recital. They will be holding it at their castle and said we are welcome of course to bring Alistair or, if we wish to stay there without him, we could train one of the servant’s up to be a Nanny and Alistair remains here? What do you think?”

“We will see nearer the time. I don’t like the idea of leaving him. But having someone trained to help us is a good idea.”



Heather put Alistair down for a nap. She felt exhausted. Waves of tiredness washed over her. Perhaps she was sickening from something. She wasn’t sure who fell asleep first, but her dreams were deep and disturbing. She felt drugged. It was as if she could not break free from the clutches of sleep but was being pulled towards a land filled with

dangers. Her sleep was fitful. She heard screaming but couldn't see where it was from. She began to panic and ran looking for the sound or trying to find her way out.

She tried to wake up. A voice inside told her this was a dream, but it felt as if there was a weight on her chest. Her body was heavy, sinking into a world that did not belong to her. She was suffocating. She fought back. Fighting her way up through the layers of make-believe. Her eyes opened wide and she sat up, gasping for air with beads of sweat upon her forehead. She felt confused, bewildered, and more tired than when she had laid down. Heather shook her head, trying to pull herself out of the tiredness. She opened the window to breathe in more air hoping that would replenish her brain, but, yawning, she picked up Alistair, who was awake and watching her.

"Are you hungry?" she asked him. His little face seemed to signify he was. She unbuttoned her top and walked around with him while he suckled. It was the simplest pleasures like these that made her feel so contented. In these quiet moments, her love for her family and this wonderful child grew beyond belief. He relied on her, needed her, and loved her. Even as he drank greedily, his green eyes did not leave her face and that connection, that pure love, welled up inside her. Love was the most wonderful emotion in the world.



Hiram asked Laird McCloud how the preparations were coming on for the wedding, and if he needed anything extra for the day. "I want to contribute and can bring over many ingredients and can lend you some of our servants too."

"Aye, that would be splendid," Laird McCloud commented. "I want to give them a good send-off."

"Aye, as do I. It will be the party of the year, of that I am sure. I can't believe my little sister is marrying." Hiram shook his head. "It doesn't seem possible."

"Aye, and my youngest boy. I would never have thought he would be the first of my boys to walk down the aisle."

“It doesn’t seem all that long ago that I got married myself!” Hiram commented. “Things change so quickly. Now my son is over six months old. Soon, he will be running around the castle.”

“Aye, they grow up fast sure enough.” Laird McCloud laughed.

“Maybe it is when we have children. We measure time differently.”

On the way back, Hiram wondered if that were true. Time did seem to be going incredibly fast. He knew he had more responsibilities now and more work to do but every time he returned home, it seemed as if his son had grown substantially. The ride back was long, but he enjoyed the sensation of the horse moving beneath him and spurred him on. He couldn’t wait to be able to teach Alistair how to ride and soon, Heather could restart her lessons. He slowed down as the lights from the castle greeted him and jumped off the horse. A young stable boy immediately went to greet him and took the horse back to the stables.

Hiram found Heather in the kitchen. She was cooking.

“Why are you cooking, and not the staff?” He asked her.

“I felt like making something special for you tonight.”

“What is the occasion? A celebration?” He wondered if she was pregnant already and trying to tell him the news.

“Nah my love, I just feel like making something nice for you. Maggie has Alistair in the other room, and she is reading to him. I just felt like experimenting and went into the garden to pick some nice fresh herbs.”

“You seem a bit tired still. Don’t overdo it.”

“I know. It is crazy. I don’t understand it. Today, I fell asleep for hours. I just couldn’t wake up.” She patted her tummy. “I am not pregnant, if that is what you are thinking.” She laughed.

“Perhaps we should get the doctor for you? Maybe a tonic?” Hiram stroked her cheek.

She nodded. She didn’t really want to, and she most definitely didn’t want to take medicine. She was still breastfeeding and that came first.

She just couldn't understand the fatigue that had hit her earlier. She still felt tired and knew if she lay down, she would be asleep in minutes.

Heather went with Hiram to the doctor. She didn't have much choice. After another night of bad dreams and feeling frightened, Hiram had marched her to the doctor's door. In a way, it was a relief. She still felt worn out and had no energy, even though the baby was sleeping well each night. She'd slept as well but still felt low.

The doctor had examined her but was puzzled.

"What's wrong with her? We know she isn't with child again. But she felt exhausted last time when she was pregnant," Hiram said.

The doctor didn't answer him right away, but instead kept studying the book he had opened on his desk. "I am not sure...I don't want to take a guess. I need to arrange some tests. We need to consider all options," he explained.

"I understand, it is just frustrating, and I feel helpless," Hiram stated.

Heather wondered if it could be a form of depression. Her mother had been depressed for a while. A low mood and exhaustion. Sometimes it could just happen without warning. "Is it possible to be depressed?" she asked the doctor.

The doctor replied, "Yes, a low mood, exhaustion, not wanting to do things, yes, it could be depression, but I think there could be more to it or, maybe a combination of things. Do not worry, we will get to the bottom of it."

"I think it might be a good idea to go and see my parents for a while. Just for a week or so. They can help me with Alistair and I can rest. Hiram, you are busy with the land again and so you cannot drop everything for me. Perhaps a week away is called for?"

Hiram nodded reluctantly but it made sense.

“I think that is an excellent idea.” The doctor beamed “When you are back, come and see me. I will discuss how you feel, and we will look at the results of your tests.



Hiram had insisted on traveling with them, but he would return to the castle the next day. He held Alistair in his arms while Heather fell asleep in the corner of the carriage. He was so worried about her. This was not normal. She'd been vibrant when he met her. But, now, she was a fraction of herself. He occupied his mind by talking to his son.

“Your mother hated me when she first met me. Would you like to hear the story?” Hiram asked.

Alistair cooed adoringly and Hiram smiled.

“She was forced to marry me, did you know that? She was so angry about it too and she was prepared to hate me forever—”

“I did not hate you!” Heather interrupted.

“Ah, you are back with us my love,” he mocked. “You most definitely didn’t like me very much, that is for sure,” Hiram stated.

“That is because I believed you arrogant but then I realized you were not. You were kind. So, you won me over...the end,” Heather informed him haughtily.

Hiram shrugged. “When Alistair is older, I will most definitely tell him all about it. I will also say that you succumbed to my many charms.”

“Annoyingly, that is true.” Heather laughed. “I still feel the same way.”

“When you feel better, you can prove it to me. But not before. You are banned from those wifely duties for now.”

Heather gasped. “How mean of you, my Laird. I bet that I could make you want me even now if I tried.”

Hiram kissed her forehead. “You could indeed my love, but I want you

to save your energy.”

The route to her parents’ home was bumpy. They sat, jostled back and forth by the rough track. Finally, they arrived, and the carriage moved slowly up the long winding path to the castle. Heather felt a sense of pleasure; it was still home to her, she realized, and she could see all the servants lined up outside the main entrance waiting to greet them and to no doubt have their first glimpse of the baby.

Heather picked up a sleepy Alistair and wrapped him in her arms, feeling a sense of pride and deep emotion at the thought of returning with her son.

“Get ready to be the center of attention little man,” she whispered to him, and stepped down from the carriage. It took the next twenty minutes before the servants would let them pass by and go in. *A baby is always welcome*, she thought. It added joy and that sense of a new life lifted everyone’s spirits. Plus, Alistair had been on his best behavior and had watched them all with his green eyes wide open in amazement. He had chuckled at their faces and had reached out eager hands for them.

Heather had laughed. “He likes to show off...just like his father,” she told the servants.

Hiram escorted them in quickly before she could say anything else. They found her parents in the drawing room.

“Son, here’s your grandma and grandpa,” Heather said, smiling as her mother rushed to see him.

“Oh, my beautiful wee boy,” she said, and then groaned as she realized he had grown. “What are you feeding him? Rocks?”

Heather laughed. “He drinks so much milk. But I am thinking to start him on some very watery solids soon. What do you think?”

“Och, we can assess this week. Oh, we have been looking forward to your stay.” She looked at Heather. “You are looking peaky my girl. I think I need to feed you up. Don’t you worry, Hiram, she’ll be her old self when I send her back to you.”

Hiram looked at her gratefully. They knew he was so worried. He

followed his father-in-law from the room so the two women could talk.

“You look very tired. Is everything okay?” her mother asked Heather.

She sighed. “I don’t know. I wasn’t sure if I was feeling depressed. But I don’t feel sad. I just feel exhausted. When I fall asleep, I cannot wake up. I remembered you had felt depressed when I was young.”

“So, mainly tiredness? Do you feel as if you don’t want to be bothered with others? You have no interest in anything else?” her mother prompted.

“No, once I am awake, I am okay. I love being with Hiram and Alistair but I am constantly exhausted. I have bad dreams too. It feels like I am drowning. Not, in water, but being pulled down into something.”

“Are you nervous about anything, worried?” Her mother was perplexed.

“Nah, just tired all the time.”

“Any chance of a pregnancy? I remember you felt so tired before.”

“No. I am not pregnant. I did wonder, but no.”

“I think some good home food, some herbs, and a lot of love will make you feel better. We will keep an eye on you this week.”

“Okay mother, thank you,” Heather said.

Her mother hugged her close. “My precious daughter, I missed you so much.”

“How is everything here?” Heather looked out of the window, noticing her father talking to Hiram about something that was happening on the land.

“You know your father, full of ideas and plans. He just doesn’t want to admit he’s getting older, and that he needs to slow down some.” Her mother rolled her eyes.

“Aye, Father is very stubborn when he wants to be. I know he doesn’t think I learned it from him...but I did.” Heather and her mother shared a laugh.

“Can I tempt you to stay longer, love?” her mother asked.

“Sadly, no. Just a week as we need to be back for Maggie’s wedding. She is Hiram’s sister. You remember her, right?” Heather asked her mother.

“Oh yes, she was a sweet girl. I hope the wedding goes well. Perhaps I will persuade your father to bring me over to see you in a month or two. I need a holiday and what could be better than seeing my lovely daughter and grandson?”

The evening passed by in a contented blur. Heather was still tired, but she felt better than she had. She felt more relaxed here than she had for a long time and realized just how much she had endured in the last year or so. It wasn’t unreasonable to think that she was exhausted. She had married Hiram, lived in fear for months of Connor, become pregnant, and Connor had tried to rape and kill her. She had witnessed Hiram murdering him, had come to find out that Hiram had punished the men who had tried to abuse her when she was younger, and she had given birth. No wonder she was exhausted. So, perhaps this break was what she needed. Some quiet family time in her old home surrounded by people who loved her. It was comforting to have her mother close to her and to also see the developing bond between her parents and the baby. It had been her dream for Alistair to grow up knowing that he was loved by one and all, and it was important to her that he knew his roots. Although, he was far too young to understand what was going on or to remember this place. But he seemed happy here and she was sure he could feel the love.

As night fell and a kind of hush settled on her childhood home, Heather lay in the darkness, listening to the quiet breathing of a husband, marveling at his ability to be able to sleep at any moment. She still felt exhausted, but at least a little more content. Her mother had begged and pleaded for them to take Alistair in with them overnight so that they could give her some much-needed rest and she had agreed, reluctantly. He was sleeping most of the night now, and after a generous feed, his little eyes had grown heavy and she could see waves of tiredness claiming him. Her mother had promised to at least wake her if he did not settle. Gradually, as the moon shone through the bedroom window, she felt its reassuring glow and at last,

felt herself begin to drift asleep.

“*T*he time has gone too fast; it feels like you only just arrived.” Her mother hugged Heather as they prepared to leave.

“I know, but hopefully you will be over to see us soon.”

“Hiram is here. Have you got everything?” Her father hugged her and gave Alistair a little kiss.

Heather nodded. “I had best take the little boy with me, though.” She reached out her hands to take him from her mother, who for a moment seemed reluctant to let him go, but handed him back.

“You have had plenty of rest and look so much better.”

Heather nodded. “It was just what I needed. I go back to the doctor soon and then maybe I’ll get to find out what it was. Possibly a virus.”

Hiram wrapped his arms around Heather and his son. “You have no idea how much I missed you both. I’ve been rattling around that great big castle on my own.”

“On your own, but with Maggie and about twenty servants.” Heather laughed. “You can see how he is prone to exaggeration, Mother.”

They said their goodbyes and went out to the carriage. She suddenly felt emotional but elated at the same time. Seeing her parents had been exactly what was needed. She felt refreshed, healthier, and very happy to see her husband. Whilst there was still a reluctance to some degree about returning to the castle where so many experiences had been tainted throughout the year, now that she was feeling better, she knew that it was time to make the place her own. Soon, Maggie would be getting married and she would be leaving. Hiram had promised that they could have a nanny on hand to help look after Alistair and

for any other children that might come along. She wondered if she should start redecorating some of the rooms so that they felt more like her own.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Hiram said when she mentioned it to him. "It is your home and we have to decide how we are going to proceed with the running of it."

"I was thinking about that," Heather said. "Perhaps we can organize more social events so that the castle becomes the hub of the community."

"Hmm. It's an idea."

"You don't like it?" Disheartened, she looked at him.

"I didn't say that," he said in a measured way. "I said it is an idea. It is something we should consider. But first, Maggie's wedding."

"Have you heard anything from your mother?"

"No, not a thing. Secretly, I think Maggie is quite upset. While it has been a relief not to have her around, for her own mother to not want to be at the wedding, well, it is quite hurtful."

Heather nodded slowly. "I feel bad about it, but I am just so glad she's not there. I do feel sorry for Maggie. I'm afraid I don't understand your mother at all."

"You and me both," Hiram said.

Hiram had arranged for the fires to be lit for their return. It was a warm and welcoming sight and Heather was glad he'd thought of it. This castle was much larger than the one she had grown up in and she was very aware of the vast empty spaces. When he was growing up, it must have felt different. At one time, there would have been here Maggie, Patrick, and Connor as well as both parents and the nannies. In those days, there would have been more servants as well. Heather knew what was missing from the place, and for her, it was life. It needed positive energy and it felt as if all the doors and windows had to be thrown open wide to allow warmth and light to flood in every single one, especially in MacGregor's quarters, but she knew that she dared not touch that area. At some point, she would be back and

would expect the rooms to be untouched. Heather couldn't blame her for that, she supposed. Heather put Alistair to bed and went to lay in the bed with Hiram. Firelight cast shadows all around the room, but the glow was so welcoming, and she realized with some surprise that it was good to be back.

"I'm glad you're feeling so much better," he remarked. "Perhaps the break was just what you needed."

"Yes, I think so. Hopefully, that's all behind me now."

"I have to be away early in the morning and won't be back until late. Will you be all right? It is not much of a welcome back, is it?"

"Don't worry, I understand. We will miss you, though."

She turned her head and kissed his cheek gently and he closes eyes, relishing the soft touch against his skin. Her scent was enticing and her presence next to him comforting. As much as he desired her, always, right here in this moment, he needed the closeness. Their relationship was developing in ways that he had not known existed. The love and the attraction were still there, but now it was at a much deeper level. Not for the first time, he thanked his father silently for arranging this marriage.

The fire had plenty of wood to burn and so they drifted off to sleep happy in each other's arms. Heather's sleep was dreamless and deep. When she woke in the morning, the fire had gone out and sunlight shone through the partially open curtains. She stretched and reached to touch Hiram but realized he had already left. She'd not felt any movement and he must have crept about, she realized. She could hear Alistair murmuring quietly to himself in his crib. Since he wasn't asking for food or attention, she relished the warmth and comfort of her bed. As she lay peacefully, she heard faint footsteps overhead and she wondered if Maggie was up there going through some of her mother's things. Hiram had mentioned that she wanted to find some of their childhood things. She could understand the need for this. Maggie was going through a transition. She was disconnecting with her childhood and taking the first steps to be a woman and married. It was understandable that she wanted to keep some of her early memories with her. Heather jumped out of bed and went to pick up

her son. He was a little wet so needed changing and then she would give him his morning feed and perhaps they would go out for a walk together. Her mood was light. She was home and she was happy.



Heather looked over at Hiram. His face was a picture. Maggie walked down the aisle, towards a very handsome-looking Heath. She was so elegant and the dress suited her diminutive frame. She wore white and the style was a masterpiece with a high lace neckline; the bodice clung cleverly to her figure and nipped in at the waist, flowing outwards. It made her waist look tiny.

Heath was not a tall man, but he seemed to tower over Maggie, who looked as feminine and delicate as Heather had ever seen. From her vantage point, Heather could see that Maggie was shaking and several times she noticed Heath's hand reaching towards hers and steadying her. Heather was beginning to like Heath more and more and realized that they were a perfect match. He was more studious than she had imagined for Maggie, but he had a flair with land design, at least he did according to his father. He had allowed Heath to section off acres of land to try new methods of design and techniques to maximize productivity and increase yield. The results were promising. He was a creative but gentle soul and as Maggie was sensitive, although commanding, in many ways, Heather could see that they would work together.

Maggie and Heath would take residence at his family home. New quarters had been assigned them and Maggie had said she would want for nothing. He looked so young and innocent standing before Maggie and yet, Heather could not shake off the idea that there was far more to him than met the eye. She liked him instinctively and was happy that he was going to be a part of the family.

She cried as they exchanged vows, her mind going back to the day of her own wedding. It had been quite incredible. But since then, for her, love had grown unbelievably strong. She felt as if she was surrounded by love right now. She had become so close to Maggie that she was like a sister. Their bond had developed gradually over the year. She

was sensible and caring, she was someone with integrity. Heather felt sure that they would continue to meet up in the coming years and that the bond would continue to grow. If Maggie was lucky enough to have children, it would be perfect for Alistair and of course, she hoped for more children yet herself.

After the wedding, Heather and Hiram saw little of the happy couple as hundreds of people waited to greet them. They did manage one quick hug before they were swept away amidst all the celebrations.

"I couldn't help but think about our own wedding when they were exchanging their vows," he told her.

"Me too," Heather admitted. "I had this incredible wave of happiness sweep over me. I was standing there with my wonderful husband next to me and had my beautiful baby boy in my arms, watching another member of my family become united in love. What more could a lass ask for?"

"Did Alistair settle okay?"

He had become fractious towards the end of the ceremony and Heather had discreetly slipped out, taking him up to her room prepared for the night. As she had laid him down in the cot, she'd noticed that his cheeks were red and blotchy and knew that more teeth were making their way through. She wondered whether anyone in the castle would get any sleep that night.

"He's asleep. But I am wondering whether he will sleep later. More teeth coming," she explained in response to his quizzical look.

He grimaced, remembering the number of hours where he had sat with his son in his arms, rocking him to sleep. He felt so helpless, knowing that his baby boy was in pain, but there was little that could be done.

"You look tired, are you sure you are okay?" He touched her face gently and bent down to kiss her forehead.

"Aye, just a little tired, it feels like a long day." She squeezed his arm. "You must not worry about me Hiram, I will be just fine."

Although she had tried to reassure him, Heather felt inwardly

exhausted. She had a dull throbbing ache across the temples, but worse was the feeling of intense fatigue that hovered over her. It felt like a dark cloud was hovering. It was an ominous feeling of gloom. She wasn't depressed but she was just holding things together. She'd not had time to go to the doctors and because she had felt so well previously, she'd let the time slip by. There were times when she struggled to keep her eyes open and yet, when she slept, her dreams were so vivid, almost as if the images were manifesting in front of her. When she'd spoken to her mother, she had put it down to some of the traumas, but Heather was starting to think otherwise.

Perhaps I'm going mad, she whispered to herself.

She was worried. What if she was developing some sort of mental health issue? What if this was her life going forward and that somehow she'd been tainted by being in the castle? She shook her head. That was stupid. Insanity or cruelty was not infectious. You couldn't just catch it.

Taking a deep breath to offset some of the tiredness, she noticed that Hiram had brought baby Alistair down to see everyone. He was wide awake, and Hiram raised an eyebrow at her as he moved past as if acknowledging her words that little sleep was likely for them later. Heather was glad that he didn't bring Alistair over to her. She loved him dearly but if he was with Hiram, she could slip away and sleep. Try to top up her energy levels. She felt this way ever since they'd left for the wedding. It didn't make sense. She made her way out of the great hallway and up the stairs towards their assigned rooms, knowing that she wouldn't be missed for a while.

Heather fell onto the bed; she was exhausted. She hadn't wanted Hiram to worry about her by telling him the truth. She felt even more tired than she had before their visit to her parents. In the last week or ten days, it felt as if that time away had never existed. All the good that had occurred was now gone. She was sinking back into a horrible state of being again and she knew she should go back to the doctor. But what was it? How could she be fine there but ill here? It was frustrating her more than she would care to admit to anyone, especially Hiram.

He often made a big deal out of when she felt just a little ill. If he knew how badly she truly felt, he would have her at the doctor's every day until they had an answer. While she loved Hiram's persistence and caring nature, she didn't want to be fussed over. She would sit quietly with the doctor and talk it over without having told Hiram. He would only worry.

Heather let her eyes close and tried to relax. She pictured a field of flowers and Scottish thistles, as these were one of her favorites. With their sturdy green stems and pink flowers on top, they were strong and resilient. They grew everywhere. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe in the scent of the flowers that lined the field in her mind. It was so vivid. It was almost as if she could smell the scents as she breathed in deeply. As she walked through the fields, she couldn't quite get to touch or pick the flowers. Every time she tried, it was as if her dream was reset. Suddenly, fear rippled through her. The sunny day was disappearing. Dark clouds rolled in. There was a bad feeling in the chilled air. But it wasn't real, this was just her attempt to relax. So why the bad feeling? She had control here didn't she? Unfortunately, she couldn't seem to escape her dream. "I need to wake up," she told herself. Finally, she opened her eyes. She felt blurry, disconnected, and was trembling. She had to go to the doctor soon.

Even though she had tried to stay awake afterwards, somehow sleep had claimed her again. She was woken later when Hiram carried in a very worn out Alistair and she smiled, trying to sit up and to gain some clarity.

"I thought you would want to kiss him goodnight. I hope you don't mind?" Hiram said.

"Not at all."

She kissed her son, who was a little fractious. "He's been so good today. Can you pop him to bed? I am nice and warm."

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"Aye my love. Just tired tonight, that's all."

"Next time tell me," Hiram warned and kissed her.

He was only in the room next to theirs and she waited eagerly for Hiram to come back. She could use some closeness with her husband, and some privacy. She was sure she would be too tired to even dream.

It didn't seem possible that Maggie had already been married for a week. She'd been over just that morning and they had shared a late breakfast; they'd both greeted her with deep pleasure. *She is glowing with joy and excitement*, Heather thought, *and it is so nice to see her in this happy state*. She had only come back to collect some more of her belongings but talked animatedly about the plans that Heath had for his home. Although with older brothers, he was not going to have outright control. However, it seemed they all listened to him and took suggestions on board.

"It's very much a family affair," Maggie said, tucking into a slice of homemade bread. I was a little worried that they would not listen to him since he is the youngest, but they all respect his opinion. It's so nice to see that."

"You're happy then?" he asked. "No doubts?"

"I should hope not, after a week." Heather laughed. "But seriously Maggie, you are happy? I know you are, it's a stupid question, I can see it in your eyes."

Maggie beamed at her. "I've never been so happy in my life."

"Sorry to break up this family reunion, but I have to ride over to one of the cottages today. I will catch you both later." He laid one hand on to his sister's shoulder and then left the room. They could hear his footsteps receding as he walked through the hallway and out the door.

"I'm glad we are alone," Maggie said. "I am a little worried about you."

"Oh no, not you, too." Heather sighed.

“Please don’t take offense Heather. Hiram hasn’t said anything to me, but you disappeared at the reception and seeing you today, well, you just don’t look yourself.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m not taking offense. It is nice that you care. I keep meaning to go to the doctor but just feel drowsy all the time. The problem is that I am having terrible nightmares, keep thinking that I’m seeing things. I wondered if I was going mad.” She tried to laugh but failed.

“I’m sure it’s nothing that can’t be solved, but go see the doctor.”

After Maggie had left, Heather felt restless. It just wasn’t right, this constant feeling of drowsiness that threatened to sweep over her. At times, it became worse through the day but at night, she would sleep into a deep, restless state, and be woken by the most paralyzing of nightmares. Perhaps it was something that she had not settled in her own life, but she could not think what. She didn’t even think about making love with Hiram in the same way. She enjoyed their closeness, but without her energy levels, her inner essence felt jaded. Her feelings had not changed at all; if anything, they had deepened, but her sexual appetite had diminished.

She had often wondered whether their passion would only burn so bright for a period of time, but she was sure that this was not the natural way of things for them. It was to do with this virus or whatever it was. It was affecting their lives though and it could not continue. She could count the number of times that they had made love since Alistair was born. To his credit, Hiram didn’t complain at all. He was so understanding of her and she knew his mind was more than a little distracted at times. There had been times when she had wondered whether he found having a baby difficult. But he loved his son. Still, having a baby certainly altered their lives. She knew he still wanted more children, but he didn’t seem to be as keen to make that happen. But then, he was worried about her health and so making her pregnant was not the priority. She even wondered if the tiredness was due to the amount of breastfeeding that she was doing. She didn’t begrudge or regret breastfeeding for a single second; it had helped create an unbreakable bond between her and the baby. Just knowing that she was able to produce enough milk to feed him filled her with

joy and satisfaction, though it was also draining.

Alistair was a big baby. He was healthy and was developing rapidly, no doubt benefiting from the richness of the milk, but he was greedy too. There were times when he would latch on for what seemed like hours. In the early days, she had been practically feeding him every hour and had become a little sore. Now he was going much longer in between sessions, but she would ask the doctor's advice about when to supplement the milk. Although she had taken to motherhood in an instinctive way, there were so many things that she did not know, and still had to learn. She knew the process would get easier with each child and that was something she wanted to think about the moment she felt well enough.

It was time to feed him again. She could hear crying from the other room and immediately, her breasts seemed to swell and fill as if responding instinctively to his need for a feed. She rushed into the room. He had pulled himself up against the side of the grave, his chubby little hands clutching the bars, as if desperate to get out. There was real sorrow in his eyes as he looked up at her and his tears were fresh upon his cheeks. Her heart lurched. Such a beautiful boy.

He reached up for her and nearly fell, not quite able to balance himself, and she caught him quickly and brought him to her. He was warm against her and she breathed in his scent. They curled up on the bed together, as it was easier to find the right position. She had learned that she could support his weight by the pillows rather than having to hold him. Heather allowed her eyes to close, enjoying the moment of closeness with her son, but fighting to stay awake. The compulsion to let the world just drift away was overwhelming. She was always terrified that she might change position and roll onto him and fought hard to stay awake, but there was an air of stillness all around and it even drew her towards slumber. Not even the footsteps walking overhead alerted her mind. She was drifting, in between sleep and daydreaming, she was contented and yielding to wave after wave of tiredness. It was only when Alistair hiccupped in her arms that brought her back from her partial slumber. She sat up quickly, panicking that she might have hurt him. Groggily, she picked him up and then placed him back in the crib, just as the room started spinning

around.

The floor beneath her seem to lurch and she clung to the crib for dear life. Suddenly, she felt hot, feverish, and knew something was wrong. Her lips felt swollen. Her tongue was dry. She couldn't seem to shout for help. Staggering towards the bed, she collapsed, tears springing to her eyes. What was wrong with her? She desperately wished that Hiram was by her side. He would know what to do, she couldn't fight this alone. Her stomach began to hurt. She felt sick and curled up in a fetal position and prayed for the sensations to pass. Moaning softly, she rocked herself, trying to offset the feelings while sweat dripped down her face and neck. She was burning up. The room continued to spin crazily and Heather lay back on the bed, not able to even lift her head.

Whatever was wrong had hit her with a vengeance. Was she dying? She needed Hiram here to watch Alistair. She knew that he would need her again soon, but she couldn't move. Dizziness engulfed her once more, and she cried out with pain. She felt disconnected with the world and slid deeper into this state of being, sweat merging with her tears, not sure what was real and what was not.

It felt as if one of her nightmares had come alive. Conner's face was leaning over her, peering at her. His hands came towards her throat and she could feel them pressing against her soft skin.

"Wake up, wake up," she told herself, but she couldn't.

She was being dragged deeper and deeper within the dream and now he was laughing at her, tormenting her. She was running as fast as she could to escape from him. She was on the moors, terrified and alone. It was hot, too hot. She had to keep going. He was chasing her. Dark clouds began to scurry overhead, blocking the sun's rays. She shivered, the sweat turning her body cold. All the while Connor was taunting her. She couldn't see him, but he was there, he always had been. He had promised he would win. She screamed, desperate to get away from him, and then the rain clouds came, forming with intensity above her. The sky was angry, clouds dense.

He was almost upon her. What if she died in her sleep? She had to keep running, but the ground was sodden now as the rain kept falling.

She was being sucked into the natural bogs, sinking past her knees and up to her waist and all the while, he was laughing. She was desperate to clamber out, crawling, and pulling herself across the grasses, hoping they would take her weight. But this was like quicksand. She was held fast and being sucked down into the depths. There was nothing she could do.

She could hear herself. "Wake up, wake up." But it didn't sound like her voice. Connor was laughing hysterically as she sank into her muddy deathbed.

"Wake up!"

It sounded like Hiram, but he wasn't here. He wouldn't be here in time to save her. Yet still, Connor tormented her. Now she was in the mud up to her neck. There was no escape this time. It was a trap. He wasn't dead. He was alive.

"Come back to me. Heather. You must wake up. Heather, please." There was desperation in that voice.

She felt his plea and for a second, felt renewed strength. She needed him. Hiram? She tried to call his name, but the mud sucked at her skin. She couldn't get away. The cries were consistent. She held onto the words. It felt just for a second as if she was being pulled free. She fought to escape the mud, lifting free, trying to break the surface of the dream. Her eyelids flickered, tears welling up, rolling down her cheeks. She was burning, the heat from the sun, and her lips, dry and parched, and her skin feverish.

The touch was insistent. She felt it soothe her skin. She felt breath upon her cheek, kisses and words of love. Then Hiram's voice broke through further.

"Heather, you must wake now." Insistent, demanding, she could not ignore him.

Her eyelids fluttered open. She saw his face, as if in a dream, distorted...but then it was him. Gradually, her vision cleared and her tears subsided. She gasped in air, realizing how she had only just escaped that muddy grave. Swallowing hard, she recognized Hiram and the doctor gazing down at her with great concern.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

Hiram and the doctor looked at each other, their expressions serious.

“Doctor?” she repeated, her heart lurching in sudden fear.

“You my dear, have been poisoned.”

“*P*oisoned?” She sat up too quickly and groaned, the room spinning around her.

Hiram held her hand, gently stroking her soft skin. “It is lucky that I came back. I don’t know how long you were like this, but you were very ill. Oh Heather, you nearly died.” Tears rolled unashamedly down Hiram’s face.

“But how? I am confused. I haven’t taken any poison.” She looked from Hiram to the doctor.

“It appears that small amounts have been added to your food for weeks,” the doctor said, shaking his head. “It was a concoction of sorts, so very hard to detect.”

“That’s why you have been getting ill here.” Hiram looked ashamed. “No wonder you regained your health when at your parents’ home...no one was trying to kill you there.”

“I still don’t understand,” she said weakly.

Hiram took a deep breath. “I’m afraid it was mother,” he said. “Apparently she has been back for weeks, hiding in her quarters.”

Realization dawned. “The creaking noises and footsteps upstairs!”

“You heard her?”

“No. Yes. No, not really. I was just vaguely aware of creaking floorboards occasionally. I wondered if it was Maggie one day. I didn’t suspect your mother at all.” Heather was perplexed. “But it couldn’t have been that straightforward. She would have been seen if she had been poisoning my food.”

“She paid someone to do it, Heather. You know the little girl you were teaching to read? It was her mother. She’d been paid handsomely by mine to add a few drops of this tincture into your food. This concoction was designed to drug you but some of the herbs are quite dangerous and so you could have easily died. She employed someone in England to create a vial of it while there. I’m not sure if she was seriously trying to kill you or was hoping to drug you so she could take Alistair.”

Heather’s eyes opened wide. “Where is he?”

“He is safe. Don’t worry. Little Helene saw her mother acting suspiciously and followed her. She saw her with her mother and they had Alistair. They were leaving. Helene raised the alarm. She knew that you would not let anyone take Alistair.”

“They tried to steal him? Your mother has been planning this all this time.” She couldn’t quite believe it and yet, it was so vile that it had to be true. “All this time that I have been feeling ill, it was because of some poison?” The information would not sink into her mind. She felt confused. Like she was observing this scene rather than participating. She swallowed hard. At least baby Alistair was safe. She had come so close to losing him to those evil, twisted women.

“You must hate me Heather and wish you had never married me.” Hiram’s eyes were downcast, tears still wet on his cheeks. He looked so forlorn that she reached out one trembling hand to wipe the tears away.

“Why would I hate you?” She was incredulous. “I love you. You did nothing wrong.”

“My family tried to kill you. First Connor and then Mother. What must you think of me for not realizing you were in danger?”

She shook her head, sinking back into the pillows. It was all too much. She was too tired to talk anymore. After kissing her softly on the cheek, Hiram escorted the doctor out. She could hear them talking in the corridor, but she didn’t really care. Her mood was flat. None of it made sense.

She felt the desire to get away and to go and spend time with her

family, but it wasn't Hiram's fault. He loved her and she loved him. Yes, she had been through several traumas due to his family but somehow, miraculously, she had survived. She could make sure her son was safe. If anything happened to that precious boy, Heather knew she would not have wanted to live. Her life would have ended with his but luckily, it had not come to that. Her eyes closed and she felt herself slipping away, falling into a deep slumber, this time through tiredness; it was her body attempting to heal but her mind needed the respite too. It was like seeing the pieces of a puzzle where you could not see the true reality until all the pieces were in place. Her thoughts fragmented and disjointed. She felt confused, wondering what on earth she could have done to have led to this situation. But deep down, she knew the fault was not hers or Hiram's, but one born from an evil mind.

When sleep came, she gave into it gracefully, relieved to not have to think or feel. There were no dreams, just oblivion. It was dark when she woke up. She sat up, needing to see that Alistair was alright. The faint embers of a fire still burned in their room and sent shadows around the walls. Testing her body, she realized she had regained quite a bit of strength while sleeping. She still felt a little shaky but could at least walk. She no longer had stomach cramps or felt sick. It was just tender rather than painful. She padded gently to the crib and looked down. He was sleeping peacefully, unaware of the terrible danger he had been in.

While she doubted that Lady MacGregor would have meant to do Alistair any harm, she was not of sound mind and so anything could have happened. What a spiteful, jealous woman. Connor had been lost through his lust for Heather and so Lady MacGregor would take her child away in return. She gazed with such tenderness at him. It was obvious the loss of her husband and son had made Lady MacGregor's grasp on sanity and reasoning slip beyond saving. Only a tortured mind could have planned such an evil act. The fact that she had paid someone else to do the dirty work also told her that there was a rational side to the madness. There was a plan. Therefore, she'd known exactly what she was doing. Helene's mother was also prepared to commit murder for money. What an evil woman.

"It's going to be all right, you know." Hiram's voice was soft in the stillness of the night. "They have both been taken away. They can't hurt anyone ever again. But I don't know what to do about her daughter. She did at least raise the alarm."

Heather looked at him sharply. "Do not send her away. Without her, we would have lost Alistair. She has been treated so badly by her mother and yet, she saved our son. I believe her mother already had a grudge against me for teaching Helene to read and write. I would like her to stay here. We can bring her up, Hiram. Give her a home. There is room here. She needs guidance but she has a good heart."

"To bring her up?" Hiram was incredulous. "Are you sure?"

"That poor girl has had a terrible life and yet, even with those lessons ingrained within her, she turned against her mother and protected our son. I know she is not our daughter, but we can look after her and give her the life that she never would have had. She has a good heart Hiram."

"As do you my lovely wife. Come back to bed, I want to hold you."

Nestled against him, Heather felt peaceful. There was much to sort out but there was light at the end of the tunnel. They were fortunate because they still had each other along with their precious son. In time, she would regain full strength and be able to live a normal, happy life, hopefully with many children completing their family. But for now, just lying wrapped up in Hiram's arms, she felt peaceful. She had emerged from the nightmare. They would move on from this.

It felt reassuring to be next to him and in that moment, she knew that she needed him. She didn't have much energy, but she needed to feel alive. There was a part of her that was afraid she would never feel human again. She pulled him close so to kiss him. The kiss was loving and then very passionate. Their tongues met. His desire was evident in seconds, but he held back.

"You nearly died. I can't."

"You can. I want you. No, I need you. Help me to feel something."

He rolled on top of her and kissed her slowly. His tongue exploring

her mouth while his hands caressed the side of her face, moving down her throat to her breasts, cupping them both gently with one hand.

“You sure?”

In answer, she pushed his head down so he would kiss her breasts and as his hand moved lower, waves of gentle pleasure rippled through her. He was so tender and loving. She felt herself come alive. She was opening like a flower bud to the light, as he tasted and touched her. She willingly invited him in. Lovemaking was slow, so gentle, and although she lacked energy, her desire for him was still there. When they were finished, they remain cuddled together and she slept soundly all night.



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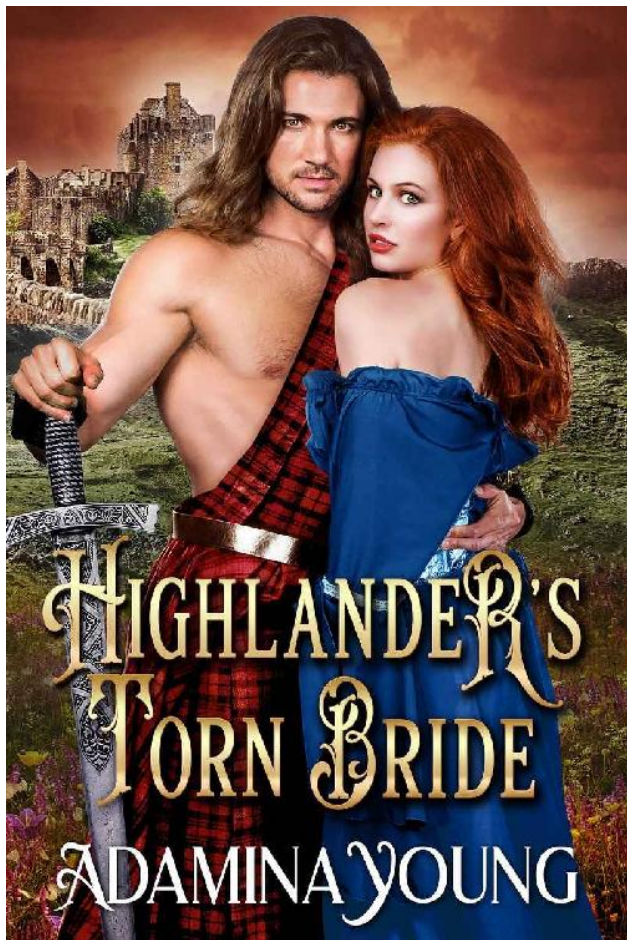
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Chapter 1

The sun was blasting against the water, creating ripples of glittering light as the waves rose and fell in a constant rhythm. The view caught Margaret off guard, for it was so rare that the sea here in Thurso, nearly as far north in the Scottish Highlands as one could get, was ever anything other than an ominous gray. Her eyes became entangled in the waves as they rose up to white peaks before caving in upon themselves, dragging her thoughts with them as they plunged into the sea.

“Margaret! Get moving or I’ll take it out of yer pay!”

Margaret Gunn snapped away from the spell of the sea, uttering a few quick apologies before she rushed back along the dock, rejoining the herd of men moving back and forth between the dock and the ship pulled up alongside. Piled high on the dock were hundreds of freshly tanned hides, all bundled together so they could easily be sold to shops all throughout Europe. The men, and Margaret, were hired by the merchant to see that the ship was properly loaded with his wares.

Two men, a pair of new hires, sneered, watching her as she crouched and wrapped her arms around one of the bundles. Their sneers lessened only a bit when she stood, lifting the bundle with the same ease as any of the other men.

Margaret ignored their stares. If she stopped to care about every man’s opinion, to verbally correct their misjudgments, she would never have time for anything else. The rest of the men on the dock had already learned that she was a hard worker, not lessened at all by her gender. These men would, eventually, do the same.

But, of course, they would sneak in whatever jabs they could in the meantime.

“Pissing away the day watching the sea... Tis all he could have expected from a woman,” one of the new hires said to the other as they walked ahead of her, laughing as they crossed the gangplank and then descending down into the ship’s hold.

The scent of leather and sweat filled the small space, penetrating her nose even though she had not dared to take a breath. The bundles of hide had been stacked carefully, with each pile reaching the ceiling before the next one was started. On a ship like this, space was precious. Every inch needed to be filled.

“Well, lad, do you ken how the wee lass will get her stack all the way up there? Tis quite a bit taller than her,” one of them said, casting a glance back in her direction, an aggravatingly smug look on his face.

“Perhaps she’ll give ye a kiss if ye offer to help her,” the other man replied, the condescending look on his face equally aggravating.

Margaret stopped her march and glared at them both.

“Ach, look! We made her mad. Donna ye look so upset, lass, ye’ll ruin yer bonny looks.”

Margaret lifted the bundle above her head and, with a soft grunt, let it fly through the air. The two men ducked as it flew overhead, looking up only just in time to see it land with a satisfying thud at the top of the stack.

Margaret curtsied and left the hold, unable to contain the satisfaction that bubbled up to crack open a wide smile on her face.

It took an hour to finish loading the hides, and another hour after that for the merchant to approve the work and pay them. Margaret watched as the sun began to sink in the sky, transforming the blue into a mixture of golds and oranges that would, under other circumstances, threaten to steal her breath away. But, for once, she had to try and keep her thoughts trapped safely inside.

Remember to buy candlesticks. Remember to buy candlesticks. Remember to buy candlesticks...

Margaret recited the reminder like a trance as she ran from the dock, the jingle of her pay comforting in her pocket. The evening traffic of

Thurso was maddening, and Margaret had to dodge this way and that on the grimy cobblestones in order to get anywhere. All around her, fishermen were shouting their prices for the daily catch, merchants were rushing their carts this way and that—not caring about anyone or anything in their path—and large clusters of women stood over large dye baths, pressing freshly woven linens under the solution until the color was perfected. No one noticed the lass in a lad's clothes as she rushed past.

Margaret sighed when she reached the town square, realizing that some orator had gathered a crowd, further congesting what would have already been unbearable to navigate. As his booming voice pinned the crowd in place, Margaret did her best to slip through the clusters of transfixed listeners, for once grateful for her smaller frame.

With one final push, Margaret stumbled out of the crowd on the opposite end of the square. She glanced up and found that the dark and penetrating gaze of the candlemaker was already upon her. She sat in her usual place, perched at the seat of her small wagon, as if she was willing to whip her horses and ride off at any moment. The cart was laden with candles of every shape and size, sorted into small and efficient baskets throughout the cart. If a customer approached with a particularly large purse, the candlemaker would even lift her seat and reveal another basket, one that was filled with candles that had been set with flowers and dyes before being carved into intricate patterns.

It had been a long time since the woman had ever presented Margaret with that basket.

"Trousers again, lass?" the candlemaker asked as she reached back and picked up a pair of plain, thick candles that were cracked and rippled from quick, uncaring dips in the wax buckets. They were the cheapest she had, and they were all Margaret could afford.

Margaret forced a stiff smile to her lips and nodded, feeling suddenly conscious of her heavy brown trousers and blue linen shirt. She wished that there was another candlemaker in Thurso. One who didn't know her and the heights from whence she had fallen.

The crowd saved Margaret from vocalizing a response. Split in two, half of the people gathered were suddenly cheering, while the other

half groaned and shook their heads angrily. The candlemaker's eyes slid up to the orator, her usual frown tilting upward with bemusement.

Shoving her thumb in the direction of the orator, Margaret asked, "What's the occasion?"

"You havena been listening? Course not. Well, twould seem that Queen Mary has finally decided how to punish Clan Gunn for their part in the Gordon Rebellion."

Margaret felt her breath catch as her heart began to race. When whispers of a possible Gordon-led rebellion against Queen Mary had slipped through the Highlands, her clan had openly declared support for the rebels. But, before the men of her clan could march south to join the Gordon forces, the news arrived that the queen had already defeated them at Corriche. It had been hundreds against thousands—a battle lost even before swords had been drawn.

Though the Gunns hadn't had the time to move against the queen, their intentions had been too clear to go unpunished. So, the questions of what the punishment would be and when it would arrive had turned into an all-consuming conversation between her clansmen. The questions had been suffocating them, infecting every conversation and moment of idle thought.

Would the queen demand hostages?

Would the laird be summoned to court for a trial and inevitable execution?

Would the queen and her loyal clans march north to remind them that the royal horse was always the one to back?

But that had been nearly a year ago. Margaret had started to believe that the punishment had secretly been upon them already, for she wasn't sure that anything would prove to be worse than the months of fear. The queen had, by doing nothing at all, robbed the Gunns of a year of laughter and peaceful sleep. They had been living in a purgatory, unable to think toward a future when they were not sure what it would look like. In Margaret's opinion, a worse punishment than the clean finality of death.

“What is it then?” Margaret asked, wishing she had taken a moment to listen to the orator before the now booming reactions of the crowd had drowned out his voice.

“Marriage,” the candlemaker said, eyeing Margaret with more interest. “Lady Isobel to one of the Mackay lads.”

Margaret winced. She had been wrong. There were two things crueler than death.

Marriage was one thing, but marriage to a Mackay, a sworn enemy of her clan, was another thing entirely. The Mackays were always the monsters in the bedtime stories designed to keep children from running too far from home, and there was good reason behind it. Generations of Mackay cattle rustlers and bandits had made those lands perilous for any person with the name Gunn. Not, of course, that the Gunns were alone in their fear, for her clan had returned every slight in kind, stoking the fires of distaste into a raging feud.

“The Lady Isobel,” the candlemaker started, causing Margaret to turn back to face her and the ever so curious curl to her lips, “is your cousin, is she not?”

“Aye,” Margaret said. And, before anything more could be asked, she took a step forward, disappearing into the crowd.



The last lingering pinks and purples of the sunset had only just been overcome by the navy of the night sky when Margaret saw her home off in the distance, the light glowing through the windows serving as a beacon to call her home. Finally seeing the house there, high on the hill, made Margaret quicken her pace.

The house, built of whitewashed stone, was one of the grandest in the countryside surrounding Thurso. Her father had built it for her mother shortly after they eloped, and he had always said that it was his way of earning forgiveness from her grandfather, who had not wished for his highborn daughter to run off and marry a merchant—no matter how wealthy and successful the merchant was.

Margaret rushed up the final steps leading to the house and pressed her hands against the door, taking care to avoid the crisscrossed pattern of studded iron straps set into the wood. With a heave that made her sore shoulders object, Margaret pushed it aside, calling, "I'm home..."

Instantly, a thunder of feet echoed above her. Margaret paused, listening to the little thuds move through the house above her before, finally, two sets of little feet, belonging to two little girls that were as different as storm and sun, came rushing down the staircase before her.

"Margy!" shouted the younger of the two, a six-year-old lass with blonde curls that bounced around her face, as she rushed down the last few stairs before throwing herself at Margaret's legs. "We have been waiting forever for you."

"Twas a big job today," Margaret replied. "Why aren't you in bed, Laura? Or you, Mariah?"

Margaret looked up at Mariah, the older of her two younger sisters, and winced when she saw the expression on her face. The family had always joked that Mariah and Laura had inherited their personality from their hair: Laura, bright and bubbly, had hair the color of sunshine; Mariah, with unusually bright red hair, had the sort of personality one would expect from an untempered wildfire. Which meant that now, as she stared up at Mariah looking red-faced and angry, Margaret knew the worst was coming.

"Tell Margaret what you did today, Laura," Mariah said through gritted teeth. "Tis why we stayed up to wait for her."

Margaret watched Laura take a piece of her hair and twist it around her finger. It was a tell, one she had inherited from their mother. Whatever Laura was about to say, Margaret would have to assume that it was a lie.

"Well, I was trying to help some lost kitten, when—"

"Nah!" came a voice to Margaret's left. "Start again and say it true."

Margaret's eyes drifted over to the woman standing in the doorway.

Tall and lean, with flour dusted across her face like freckles, Ann was the picture of a perfectly terrifying Highland housekeeper.

“Well, you see, I was playing in the rocks on the backside of the hill —” Laura started, looking down at the worn floorboards and twisting her toe against one of the knots.

“The ones that we are not allowed to go near!” Mariah interjected, the pitch of her voice high as she attempted to withhold the gust of anger within her.

“Yeah, those ones. Well, I slipped and fell and accidentally tore a hole in my boot,” Laura finished, spitting out the conclusion as quickly as she could.

As if she now had permission to release, Mariah sprung into a tirade about how ferociously Laura ought to be punished. Playing on those rocks had always been a capital offense in this household, owing to the fact that the hill there was steep and the rocks jagged. Her older brother had played there once in his youth, resulting in a gash from shoulder to navel that they had believed to be fatal. He survived, but had never outgrown the stiffness in his arm. Laura escaping the fall with only a ruined boot was nothing short of a miracle.

But, even as fear for her sister’s safety made every nerve in her body tingle, all Margaret could feel was the weight of a few small coins in her pocket. They weren’t enough for new shoes.

“You should lock her in her room for a week so she can learn how to sit still and entertain herself in a more civilized way!” Mariah was shouting when Margaret finally pulled her thoughts out of her pocket.

“Enough! Go to bed, both of you. We will discuss punishments in the morning,” she said.

Laura, seeming to think that Margaret’s response meant she was getting away with it, smiled and went rushing up the stairs, pushing past Mariah, who had a strange look of calm on her face. Margaret caught her sister’s eye and sighed, giving her a little wave of encouragement to speak whatever it was that was still on her mind.

“You ken, if you let me go work with you, we could pay for new boots

more easily,” Mariah said.

“No,” Margaret replied, “absolutely not.”

“But—”

“We have had this discussion,” Margaret interrupted. “I will not allow you to consider taking on a job until you turn sixteen. I need you here, helping Ann with the house, and with Laura.”

“I am fifteen already, you’ll not be able to stop me for much longer,” Mariah said, her voice laced with angry warning.

“Fine,” Margaret shot back, rubbing her temple with frustration. “Now, it has been a long day and I have much to think about, so please go to bed.”

“Things to think about? You mean you have a visitor set to come?” Mariah scoffed. “You ken, I am—”

“Alright,” Ann said. “Ye speak yer peace in the morn. Up to bed, lass.”

With a huff and a few stomps, Mariah went back up the steps. A loud slam moments later indicated that she had, in fact, made it back to her and Laura’s shared room.

Margaret groaned and slumped onto the steps, dropping her head into her hands.

“Want to talk about it?” Ann asked, leaning up against the railing. Only one year older than Margaret, Ann had always been her closest friend. She had been the only one to stick around when the inheritance left behind by Margaret’s parents had dried up, vowing to stick with Margaret through thick and thin.

“Isobel is getting married to a Mackay,” Margaret said, her words coming out muffled through her fingers.

“Yer cousin Isobel?”

“The very one.”

“To a Mackay?”

“Aye, Queen Mary’s orders, I guess.”

“Tis a terrible fate for a Gunn to wed a Mackay.”

“Aye, tis.”

“Such a thing is only deserved by those who are truly awful.”

Margaret nodded.

“So,” Ann said, releasing a long slow breath, “tis a good thing that Isobel is truly awful.”

A laugh burst from Margaret’s lips, a laugh that was quickly mirrored by Ann, resulting in the pair of them trapped in a fit of giggles. It was true: Isobel was awful.

Margaret loved her cousin, but only because of that strange impulse in one’s blood to love one’s relatives unconditionally. Her and Isobel had been born within a week of each other and, because of this, their mothers had been keen on seeing them become the closest of friends. Whenever Margaret’s father would leave for business, her mother would pack her up and bring her down to the laird’s house in Braemore, where she would stick Margaret in a room with Isobel with the expectation that the friendship would form. All that had ever formed was tolerance.

Both of the girls had too much of their fathers in them. Margaret, the daughter of a self-made merchant, had always been a practical, sensible, and resilient girl. Isobel, on the other hand, was the daughter of a laird, full of entitlement and selfish whims. Where Margaret craved order, Isobel created chaos. It had always been that way between them, with Isobel always getting her way and Margaret learning to just grit her teeth and smile while she counted down the days until they returned home.

Wiping a tear from her eye and snorting back more giggles, Margaret tried to compose herself. “Should not be so funny. Tis an awful fate, even for Isobel.”

“Aye,” Ann said, lifting her apron away from her skirt and fanning her face. “I suppose tis true. So, do ye think ye’ll be invited to the wedding?”

“Unlikely. The last time I saw her was at my father’s funeral, and that

was already two years ago.”

“Right, when the ninny walked ‘round the house expecting everyone to shower her with praise for taking the single day journey north in order to comfort her poor cousins,” Ann said in a mocking tone. “Oh well, I’m sure ‘twill be a foolish affair. All weddings are.”

“If you keep up that sort of talk, I won’t invite you to my wedding,” Margaret teased.

Ann groaned. “Margaret, do ye really think that marrying—”

Ann was interrupted with a large crash from the floor upstairs. Her entire face went pale before it boiled back up into a steamy hot red that even Mariah could never muster.

“Those girls...” she hissed as she stood and went rushing up the steps.

Margaret watched Ann go, feeling too exhausted to join her as her mind slipped back to Isobel.

There were many days that Margaret envied Isobel; days like today where every muscle in her body ached after a long day of work and all she had to show for it were a few coins and a pair of cheap candlesticks. While she heaved bundles of hides here and there, she would imagine her cousin sitting in some overly stuffed chair, her thin lips pursed and stained red from an afternoon cup of wine while she debated what dress to wear to supper. Her cousin’s life had always seemed so easy, so privileged, with her wanting for nothing while Margaret felt the pain of every small purchase in the calloused crevices of her hands.

Now what was there to envy? Isobel may have been blessed in some ways, but Margaret would always have an edge over her cousin in at least one regard.

A soft, gentle knock on the door roused her, and Margaret stood, ripping the cap off of her head and running her fingers through her hair to loosen the tangled waves as she crossed to the door and pulled it open.

Choice. The word slipped through Margaret’s body like a summer’s breeze, loosening the tightness in her shoulders that she hadn’t even

felt building.

The lad standing on her doorstep straightened just a bit when he saw her, his eyebrow rising just a bit as his dark eyes looked her up and down. After a long pause, he said, "How is it that those clothes look better on ye than they ever did on me?"

Margaret blushed and leaned into the doorway. "Be careful, Gavin. You'll never see me in a dress again if you keep that up."

Gavin's smile broadened, and he reached out and pulled her into the darkness, boldly enveloping her in his arms. "I missed ye, lass."

"You would not have to if you stopped them from taking you on such long trips," Margaret replied, earning a small grunt of amusement from Gavin that she felt vibrate into her own chest.

For so much of her life, the dark-haired boy next door had been nothing more than a nuisance—her brother's companion for every practical joke and pull of her hair. She had despised every moment that she was forced to spend in his presence, wishing that he would stop teasing her and giving her strange looks from across the room.

"Someday, you might come to appreciate his attentions," her mother had said with a coy smile when a twelve-year-old Margaret had complained about his near constant presence in her life. "Every lass will someday need a lad."

"But," her father had interjected, lowering his papers so he could give his wife a stern look, "in the meantime, you can do your father a favor by avoiding lads at all cost."

Though Margaret's mother had sighed and rolled her eyes, Margaret had taken her father's statement as if it were law. Whenever she thought she could hear Gavin's voice echoing through the halls of the house, Margaret had made a point of disappearing. Her father's office became her refuge, where he would silently pass her some boring tome or another about business, the leather trade, or history, and Margaret would let herself enjoy the comfort and security of her father's presence.

But then Margaret's mother had died. And then her father had

followed into her the grave a year later. One afternoon, only a week after her father had been buried, Margaret had felt the walls of the house caving in upon her, and the tears had come so suddenly and so fiercely that there was nothing she could do to tame them. That had been when Gavin appeared in the doorway, his face frozen as he watched her try in vain to brush away the tears. There had been nowhere for her to run anymore, nowhere for her to hide. Her safe haven was buried in the ground and all she could do was let Gavin see her suffering.

That had been the first time he had embraced her, pulling her from her seat and into his arms with a strength she hadn't known he possessed. Though she knew she should have pushed him away, she found herself trapped in his arms, unable to do anything but accept the comfort as he told her that he would take care of her, that he would keep her safe.

Her mother had been right. She now needed his attention nearly as much as she needed air.

When Gavin finally released her, his arms slipping back down to his side slowly, as if he was fighting every inch, Margaret led him back into the house and shut the door behind him with a bit more force than was necessary, hoping Ann would hear the sound from wherever she was in the house and know what it meant. While Margaret had outgrown her distaste for Gavin, Ann had not.

"So," Margaret started, "what did my uncle have you do this time?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Gavin said in his usual way as he wandered into the sitting room.

"Where is Alan?" Gavin asked, looking up and around as if he would find Margaret's brother embedded in the woodwork.

"Who knows."

Gavin studied her face, as if waiting for her to react, before his eyes slipped away and began to study the room, eventually coming to pause on the mantle. Margaret winced, instantly realizing what he was looking at. Or, rather, not looking at.

Her father had always made a point of bringing her mother back some trinket or bauble from his travels. There had been vials of sand from the beaches of the Mediterranean, amethyst crystals from France, and tiny glass figurines from London, all displayed on this very mantle. But in the years following her father's death, the collection had slowly dwindled until all that had remained was a small silver box containing locks of her parents' hair braided together. Margaret had thought that it, more than anything else on the mantle, had been priceless. But it hadn't been.

Margaret saw Gavin's face cloud. She watched the change with a heart that felt suddenly like it was carved of stone, hanging both heavily and unsympathetic in her chest. Why had he gone looking for another sign of her house being stripped bare if it was going to upset him?

"When will you take me away from this place?" Margaret asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Gavin took a deep breath and held it for a long moment before he let it slip back from his lips. "I havena earned enough money yet to give ye the house ye deserve."

"Anything you could give would be better than this," Margaret said, her voice cracking.

Gavin came over to her, reaching for her face as if he intended to pull it to his own, but his hands froze midair. They hovered there helplessly for half a heartbeat before Gavin cleared his throat and dropped his hand to his side, his fingers balling up into a fist that she was sure was designed to contain them from attempting some other reckless act. Other than the occasional hug, Gavin never touched her out of respect for her uncle.

After a few moments of silence, Gavin finally said, "It won't be much longer."

"But—" Margaret started.

"Yer the niece of the laird—a man that I owe more than just my respect. We have to do this right, Margaret. We just have to," Gavin said, cutting Margaret off before she could make another argument that would test his patience. "Now, tis been a long day for us both,

and tis a bit improper for me to be here so late without your brother at home. Can I come by again in a day or two?"

"Sure," Margaret replied, following Gavin only with her eyes as he left the room and then, unceremoniously, slipped through the door and into the dark of the night.

Margaret stood there, staring at the door, her eyes burning with the singular desire to shed a tear. But it had been years since she had cried last, on the day that Gavin had found her at her lowest point. That night, her tears finally dried, and she vowed that the next tear she shed would be a happy one. And, so far, she had kept that vow. She wasn't about to allow herself to cave to her pain now, for this pain was nothing compared to what she had felt before.

Margaret was so focused on blinking back tears that the door flying open sent her jumping back in fright. A figure shrouded in a filthy woolen cloak came stumbling in, and Margaret raised her fists and gave a small shout of warning, preparing to rush at the intruder before he threw back the cloak of his hood, revealing a matted mop of copper hair.

"Calm down, will ye? Ye really ken how to make yer brother feel welcome in his own house," Alan said, his words slurring together as he clumsily undid the fastening of his cloak, letting it just fall to a heap on the floor. "Do we got any ale?"

"No," Margaret said with a sigh. "And I do not think you need any."

"You're right, I need whiskey!" Alan said, reaching down to unlace a small flask from his belt. He held it up, his plump red face full of pride, as if he had done something worth her applause. When Margaret just started at him, her arms crossed in disapproval, he shrugged and took a long swig.

"Has the allowance from our uncle arrived yet?" he asked as he wiped away the dribble of dark alcohol that had slipped down into the patchy growth of hair on his chin that he must have been trying to call a beard.

"No," Margaret said. "You would ken. You only come home the day before tis set to arrive."

“Ach, how observant of ye. Well, then tomorrow I shall ask ye again.”

“Laura needs new shoes.”

“What?”

“I said, Laura needs new shoes. Perhaps this time, you can leave us just a bit of the allowance so that your sister can have a proper pair of shoes.”

Alan rounded on her, the glossy shroud over his eyes clearing ever so slightly as the recognition that his sister was fighting back sobered him. “Well, I have more pressing needs. I spend day in and day out looking for better opportunities for this family. Do ye think that comes fer free? Ye’ll find a way to pay for Laura’s new shoes. Ye always do.”

Margaret stood there for a long time after Alan went up the steps, every bit of her too exhausted to do anything but breathe.

It won't be much longer. He promised. It won't be much longer.



Nearly two weeks later, Margaret walked up the path to her house, the afternoon sun beating down on her face and reminding her that it was far too early to be coming home from work. But there had been so little work needing to be done that day, and while the other men could shrug it off and go offer their services elsewhere for the afternoon, Margaret could not. No one else was willing to hire a lass. So, she was forced to return home with a painfully meager collection of small coins. Laura’s shoes, which Margaret had managed to patch with leather torn from a pair of her father’s old shoes, would have to be made to last another week.

Margaret was only halfway up the hill when Ann burst from the door, her face ashen and her eyes wide and wild.

“Thank God ye’re here. Hurry up, hurry up!” she hissed, rushing forward and grabbing Margaret’s arm.

“What is wrong?” Margaret replied, worry swelling in her breast. “Is it the girls?”

“Nay,” Ann hissed as she drug Margaret toward the door. “Tis your uncle.”

“My uncle?” Margaret replied, pulling her arm free from Ann’s grasp.

“Yes, as in the Laird of Clan Gunn. He is in the sitting room. He showed up this morning and I have had to entertain him all day. Did ye ken that he is an awfully impatient man who despises being kept waiting? I didn’t, but I sure ken now. Come on,” Ann replied, the words falling so quickly from her lips that Margaret could barely distinguish one from the next. “Just run up and change yer clothes as quickly as ye can.”

Margaret let Ann hustle her through the door, and she was halfway up the steps to her room when a deep voice boomed through the house, “Ann? Is that my niece finally home from heaven only kens where? Bring her to me immediately.”

Ann, hovering in the entry to the sitting room, murmured, “She is just going up to change, Laird Gunn.”

“Bloody hell, tis of little importance. Bring her to me now,” he shot back.

Margaret looked down to Ann, who was looking back up at her, her face even paler than it had been a moment prior. With a sigh, Margaret braced herself and went back down the stairs, taking a moment to brush some of the dust off of the undyed brown vest that she had on over her white shirt. Or, at least, it had once been white. Now it was more of a yellow.

Pausing just outside the room, Margaret straightened her posture and forced her face to relax so her expression could soften into ladylike demure. Then, ready to face whatever was about to come, she slipped into the room. “Uncle! Tis so good to see you.”

Her uncle had been sitting with his back to the door, so, when Margaret came in and settled herself into his view, she was able to witness his full reaction as his face morphed from anger to shock to confusion to scorn.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

“Working,” Margaret replied, trying to give him a cheerful smile. “I help some of the traders down at the docks.”

“You’re a lady, not a dockworker.”

“Yes, well, we all do what we must,” Margaret replied, taking the chair beside his.

“You, a lass, and are wearing trousers to present yourself to the laird of your clan,” he groaned as his hand massaged his temple. “Tis as if you were raised by beggars and not one of the most prominent merchants in Scotland.”

“Well, I did attempt to dress in a way that would have pleased you more,” *or at least displeased you less*, “but you insisted that I come to you immediately.”

“Aye, because I assumed that my niece wouldn’t be dressed in rags that are not even well-suited to cleaning my floor.”

Margaret tensed, annoyed at the realization that he thought her current state was more shameful for him than it was for her. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Uncle?”

He shifted in his chair, clearly not ready to let the topic of her appearance go even though etiquette now implored him to allow her the change of subject. “I would rather discuss that when your brother returns.”

“Ah, so then you plan on staying with us for a while?”

His brows knit together. “Of course not. When will he return?”

“Well, the last allowance you sent arrived one week and five days ago.”

“So?”

“So, that means he is not due to be home for another two weeks and two days. Correction, one day. He always comes home the night before the next allowance comes,” Margaret replied. “Though I am sure you could find him sooner if you are willing to search every tavern, brothel, and gambling house in Thurso.”

Her uncle leaned back in his chair and looked around the room, as if he was starting to understand why things looked so decrepit. “And you just let him take the money and leave?”

“You ken, I never thought about stopping him,” Margaret said, slapping her hand against her leg in mock discovery. “Next time, I’ll just keep him here at sword point.”

His eyes flashed over to her, his face tight with annoyance. “Tis not—”

“Oh, wait,” Margaret interrupted, “you are right. I am your niece and a lady. I should keep him here at needlepoint. Perhaps less effective, but far more appropriate.”

The laird looked suddenly exhausted, as if her words had leached away the last vestiges of energy left in his bones. Margaret thought she even saw a few of the hairs on his head turn gray. “I always thought you to be the perfect image of your father, but here I am finding out that you had your mother’s mouth all along.”

“What are you doing here, Uncle?” Margaret asked, trying not to let herself feel warmed by the comparison to her mother, for he hadn’t meant it as a compliment.

He sighed, long and deep, turning his gaze to the crackling fire in the hearth. “Isobel is gone.”

“What do you mean gone?”

“I believe the meaning is quite clear. We do not ken where she is or when she is returning.” He hesitated, a look of pain coming over his features. “Or if she will ever return.”

“But, why would—”

“Because your cousin is a foolish girl with dreams of grandeur that reach far beyond her means,” her uncle snapped.

“Her and that Mackay lad exchanged one bloody letter and I guess it was not poetic enough for her. She said that the marriage would be pointless. I thought she was putting on airs to show her displeasure at having to marry a Mackay, as any good Gunn lass would, but that foolish lass actually had the nerve to run off.”

Margaret twisted her fingers to keep them from ripping her hair from her head as she processed the news. “But what about the queen’s order? She’ll have her head—all of our heads.”

Her uncle, who mere moments ago had been shaking with rage, was suddenly still. His green eyes, which were a perfect match to Margaret’s own, were twinkling with what looked like happiness. It took Margaret a moment to realize why and, when she did, she felt the color drain from her face. “No, absolutely not.”

“Like your life here is so fine?” her uncle said, gesturing around the barren room with its worn-out carpets and emptied shelves.

“Tis finer to live like this than to wed a Mackay.”

“Is it?” her uncle pressed. “Will it still be so fine when the queen marches north to burn every Gunn she can find to satisfy her anger?”

Margaret sank back into the threadbare chair, hoping that it would somehow swallow her whole. If Isobel openly refused to accept what was a fairly simple punishment for the actions of her clan, then the queen’s anger would be untamable. No mercy would be given to any with the name of Gunn.

“What exactly is it that you are proposing, then? The queen ordered for your daughter to wed the Mackay. Will she be content with your niece?”

“Probably not,” her uncle admitted, tapping the tips of his fingers together in thought. “But you do look like me, and none from Clan Mackay have ever met Isobel. If I introduce you to them as my daughter, they will have no reason not to believe it.”

Margaret pressed her face into her hands. It was a foolish plan, so full of cracks that there was no way it would ever hold, but was there any other option?

“No,” Margaret said, the word coming out of her mouth as much as a surprise to her as it was to her uncle. But it felt right, all the same.

Rather than yell, as she expected him to do, her uncle leaned back in his chair and said, “Your father always boasted that you were the most like him out of all of his children. Tis the only reason I bothered

coming, for only your father was both clever and resilient enough to see a plan like this succeed. How disappointing to find that in being most like your father, you are still so... average.”

Margaret felt every hair on her body stand on edge as the heat of her mortification rose through her like a volcanic eruption. “How dare—”

“Your father,” her uncle interrupted, his voice laced with contempt, “said that no good businessman would say the word *no*. They would simply name their price. So, Margaret, will you prove my last comment by storming out of the room, or will you name a price?”

Of course, he would use her father’s favorite phrase against her. But how did he expect her to just immediately determine the value of her life? It was an impossible exercise, and her head ached as a thousand thoughts ran through her head, each bleeding and slipping into the other until her mind was merely a muddy puddle.

“A few fine gowns? Jewels?” her uncle pressed, amusement filling his gaze as he watched her flounder before him like a fish caught in a net.

“Of course not!” Margaret snapped. *Does he think that I am that foolish?* Margaret thought before it hit her: he *did* think she was that foolish. Just like the men on the docks, he was underestimating her. That realization settled her, righting the chaos in her mind as suddenly everything became so clear.

Her uncle was still looking amused as Margaret straightened herself and cleared her throat. “I’ll not ask for gowns and jewels because you are already certain to be giving those to me.”

“Will I?”

“Aye. You ken by simply looking around this room that I am unlikely to own anything so fine, and I am quite certain that the Mackays would find it hard to believe that the daughter of Laird Gunn would be allowed to wear clothes that were—now how did you put it? Ah, yes—not even suited to cleaning your floor.”

Margaret expected the humor to fade from her uncle’s eyes, but it lingered, his smile twitching with the temptation to broaden. “What, then?”

“You’ll take Mariah and Laura back to your home. Raise them as your own, give them jobs and treat them like maids, do whatever you wish with them so long as they are fed, sheltered, and properly clothed until such a time comes that they choose to leave on their own. And you’ll also convince the Mackays to retain Ann as my personal servant.”

Her uncle pondered for a moment, tapping his chin as he appraised her. “Fine, but I will no longer send an allowance to your brother.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“So, you’ll not be upset when your brother drinks and gambles your home away?”

“This house stopped being a home a long time ago,” Margaret said. “Besides, I’ll be living in some Mackay castle. What do I care if this house still stands?”

To that her uncle actually chuckled, shaking his head as he reached forward. “Well then, Margaret, do we have a deal?”

“Aye.” Margaret clasped his arm. “We have a deal.”



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About the Author

Since she was a child, Adamina was inspired by stories of true love overcoming every obstacle! So, she started writing her first book at the age of 23!

A few years later, she met her own “Highlander” During their honeymoon, they decided to travel to Scotland. And then everything changed...

Adamina LOVES to connect with her readers, and reads all the messages she gets!

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